

Young Klondike

STORIES OF A GOLD SEEKER.

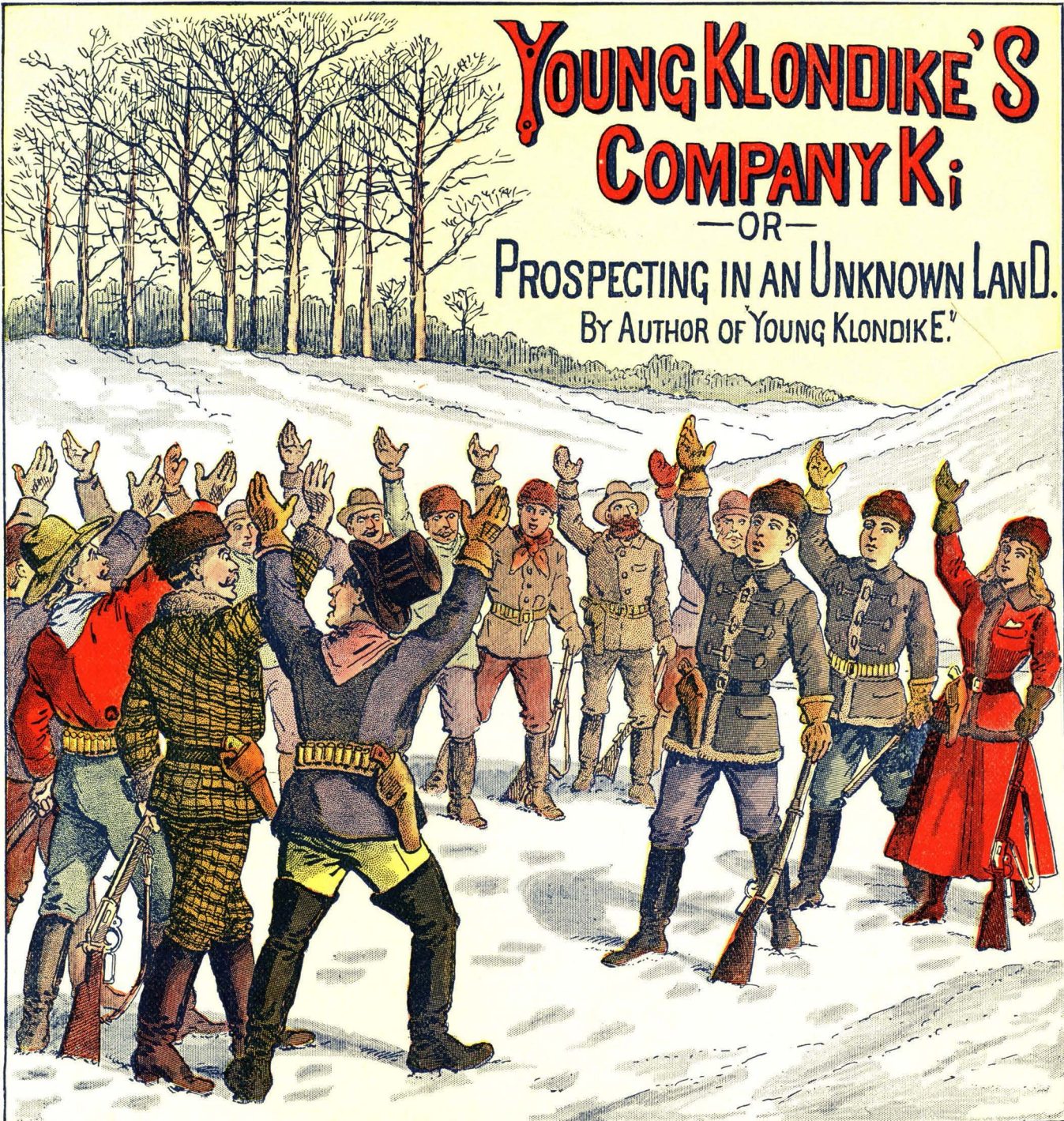
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YOUNG KLONDIKE'S COMPANY K; —OR— PROSPECTING IN AN UNKNOWN LAND. BY AUTHOR OF YOUNG KLONDIKE.



"Swear that you will be true to me, boys, no matter what comes!" cried Young Klondike. The men without exception threw up their hands. "By the Jumping Jeremiah, I'll clap the bracelets on the first kicker who shows himself!" cried the Unknown, putting up both hands.

YOUNG KLONDIKE.

⇒ Stories of a Gold Seeker. ⇐

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CHAPTER I.

THE MIDNIGHT MEETING.

AT the time winter was about to set in up in the Klondike country, there was a good deal of talk going the rounds at Dawson City, Forty Mile, and almost all the mining camps, to the effect that the famous firm of Golden & Luckey were about going into some new enterprise, and there was great curiosity shown to know what it might be, but nobody seemed able to tell.

There was always more or less talk going the rounds about Golden & Luckey.

The senior partner of that firm was Ned Golden, better known as "Young Klondike," the junior was Dick Luckey. They were both clerks together in New York City before they came out to the Klondike. Besides these two there was Miss Edith Welton, also a full partner, and an odd little man, who always persisted in wearing his hat on the back of his head, and who passed by the name of the "Unknown."

Miss Edith Welton, as was generally known, was a young lady whose life Ned Golden saved from a wrecked steamer on the occasion of his first voyage up the coast.

Miss Edith was then on her way to Dawson City to look for her father, but failing to find him had interested herself in the enterprises of Golden & Luckey, and made a great deal of money, like the other members of that famous firm.

It was said that this enterprising young lady was worth a million at least, and many believed that she was worth a great deal more.

As for the Unknown there is little to say in way of introduction, because the man was a mystery; he

would not tell his name; he would not tell where he belonged or anything about himself, beyond the fact that he was a detective, looking for some mysterious criminal whom he always called his "man."

Who this criminal was, or what crime he had committed was one of the things which even Young Klondike, who regarded the Unknown as one of his dearest friends, could not have told.

These four constituted the firm of Golden & Luckey, and it was about them that everybody was talking.

Why? Simply because everything Young Klondike touched was successful, and everybody knew that this enterprise must succeed.

In fact it had now got to be so that whenever it was known that Young Klondike was going to try prospecting at any particular point there was a general rush there, and it became necessary for Ned Golden to be very secret in all his movements, which was perhaps the reason why we find him on a certain night almost at the witching hour of twelve, hurrying through the dark streets of Dawson City with the big fur collar of his ulster turned up about his ears and his cap pulled down over his eyes.

One or two belated pedestrians tried to stare into his face, but Ned turned his head away and kept it concealed.

"What a nuisance it is that I can't walk through the streets of Dawson without being stared at and very often followed," he muttered. "It has got to be a regular thing to watch my movements nowadays."

He hurried on, passing several well known gambling saloons brilliantly lighted.

Around the doors of these places many persons were gathered, some going in and out, others talking over their winnings or losings or discussing business.

As he passed them Young Klondike took more than usual care to prevent himself from being recognized.

"It won't do," he muttered; "if I am seen all Dawson City will be onto my scheme."

Presently he approached a narrow alley into which several men had just turned.

They were roughly dressed, hardy looking fellows, evidently miners.

Ned turned into the same alley and followed on to the door of a warehouse which had a side entrance to the levee, or river front.

"Hello, neighbor! Are you in for this, too?" asked one of the group, which had gathered at the door.

"Yes, I am," replied Ned, quietly.

"Get a note from Young Klondike?"

"No."

"How did you hear of it, then?"

"Young Klondike himself told me. Have you given the signal?"

"Yes."

"Strange no one answers. There must be some of them in there—give it again."

As Ned thus spoke, one of the men caught sight of his face.

"Gee, fellows! It's Young Klondike, himself!" he cried. "Are you all blind that you can't see?"

It was no use trying to keep up his incognito any longer, nor had Ned Golden any desire to do it.

"Yes, boys, I am Young Klondike," he said, throwing up his cap so that they could see his face, "and I'm very glad to see you all here."

"We are here for business, boss," said the one who had acted as spokesman. "We hope you've got a good thing for us."

"I believe that it will prove so; it depends largely upon yourselves."

"We'll stand by you, boss, through thick and thin."

"You may have to. There is no telling where this enterprise may take us, but I flatter myself there is no doubt about the main part of it—we shall find gold."

Having said this, Young Klondike rapped hard upon the door in a peculiar way—first one rap, then a pause, then two raps, after which there was another pause, and then two raps more.

"Is that the way you did it?" he asked.

"No," said one of the men. "Mat Morgan didn't give the last two raps."

"Ah! Then that accounts for it. You must have read my directions wrong, Morgan, for that was the signal I gave."

Before Mat Morgan had a chance to make any answer, the door was cautiously opened, and a man's head was thrust out.

As the head wore a battered plug hat perched upon the back, it was easy to recognize the Unknown.

"Hello!" he exclaimed. "It's the king of the Klondike himself! How about these others? Are they all true and worthy condidates, my lord?"

"They all are as far as I know," replied Ned, look-

ing at the faces around. "I suppose you have all got your letters to show, boys?"

All answered in the affirmative and they passed inside the old warehouse.

Yet Ned Golden in not being more particular had done a very foolish thing.

If one lays down a rule he ought to stick to it, unless there is some good reason for a change.

This midnight meeting was to be a profound secret from all except those specially invited to attend, and no one was to be admitted without showing Young Klondike's written invitation.

This was all very well, but here was Young Klondike himself violating the rule at the "first go off," and passing in as many as half a dozen men without looking at their letters at all.

Once inside the warehouse door the newcomers found the long room lighted by two smoky lamps.

There were about twenty persons already assembled, all men except one, and that one we need not mention was Edith Welton, the lady partner in the famous firm.

Dick Luckey was there, too, and so were several old time prospectors who had worked with Young Klondike before.

All seemed to have been waiting for the arrival of our hero, for now they put themselves in an attitude of attention, while Ned, throwing aside his clumsy ulster, mounted a box and began to talk.

"Gentlemen," he said, "I have summoned you here this evening to propose a new scheme. Most of you have had more or less experience in mining—indeed, I may say that it is the case with you all—and yet, so far as I am aware none of you have made any great money digging gold."

Cries of: "That's right! You've hit it! Let us in on your luck, boss," and other similar remarks were heard.

"I want to let you in on my luck, and that's just what I'm aiming at," continued Ned. "As for myself and my partners we have been exceptionally lucky, and are anxious to let in others so that our methods of prospecting may become more generally known. We have received tips on a new region; a region wholly unknown. Gold may be there and it may not—we cannot positively tell, although we think we are making no mistake. My plan to-night is to organize a regular company made up of ourselves and you unsuccessful miners, if I may be allowed to call you so, and go on a prospecting tour in an unknown land."

Ned paused.

It was only necessary to listen to the exclamations to show how willing these men were to put themselves under his leadership.

Cries of "We are with you! Lead us where you will, we'll follow! Show us a good prospect and we'll be true to you!" were heard all over the room.

Dick Luckey, who stood beside his partner, thought he had never seen a more determined set of men.

The Unknown, whose eyes were usually everywhere.

seemed to be scanning each face in turn, as though he would read their inmost thoughts.

"Now then, gentlemen," continued Ned, "I presume you would like to know just what my plan is, and where this wonderful unknown country is to be found. I'll break the suspense by telling the location first. It is to the Ketchumstock hills, away back of Circle City that I propose to go, and——"

Ned's revelation had reached thus far, when all at once the Unknown made a rush into the midst of the assembled throng and seized a big French Canadian by the collar, shook him till his teeth chattered, crying out:

"Ha! At last I've found my man! By the Jumping Jeremiah, I've got him! Watch me put the handcuffs on him! Ye gods and little fishes! Wrong again! I don't know this fellow at all, and I'm dead sure he has no business here."

Now this torrent of words and the Unknown's sudden attack, turned all eyes toward the would-be prospector.

"Show your letter of invitation!" cried the detective. "Out with it! Let's know who you are!"

CHAPTER II.

THE DEPARTURE OF COMPANY K.

"WHAT is all this row about?" cried Ned. "Zed, what in the world are you doing?"

Young Klondike jumped off the box and hurried toward the Unknown.

"Don't you talk!" cried the detective. "This fellow is a peach, he is! Oh, he's a bird, I tell you! Let him produce his letter of invitation, if he can!"

"What's the matter?" growled the man, looking as though he would like to annihilate the Unknown, although, of course, he did not dare to make a move with so many eyes upon him. "Because I happened to have lost my invite, am I to be shaken all to pieces; to be kicked and pulled about like a dog?"

"There you are!" cried the Unknown, triumphantly. "He can't produce his letter. I knew it perfectly well—read it in his face."

"This is serious," said Edith. "Ned, we ought to make an example of this man."

"Let him explain himself, if he can," said Dick. "I'm for not condemning anyone unheard."

"Silence, all!" cried Ned, springing upon his box again.

Silent then the prospectors certainly were, but the Unknown and two others never let go their hold on the man's arm.

"Does anyone know this fellow!" called out Young Klondike. "If I am not greatly mistaken he came in here with me."

"That's what he did, boss," said Mat Morgan. "I know him. It's Rene Benoit, as tough a tough as there is on the Klondike—an old French trapper who

knows every inch of the mountains, good whisky when he sees it, how to pick a friend's pocket when he's full, or cut his throat when he has money and it can't be got no other way. That's the kind of a hairpin he is, and I'll leave it to half a dozen of my old pards here if I hain't right."

"He's dead right. Mat has hit it! Benoit's no good!" were some of the exclamations from the crowd.

Young Klondike saw at once that in spite of all his precautions there was a spy at the meeting, and that he alone was to blame.

"Boys, I certainly never invited Rene Benoit to join us here," he said. "It is my fault, though. I should not have let him in without looking at the letter. Open the door! Fire him out!"

"Kick him out!" roared Mat Morgan.

"He ought to be knifed!" another cried, and this violent remark was immediately followed by others still more threatening, but Young Klondike instantly "called down" these men.

"None of that!" he cried. "We leave that sort of business to such scoundrels as this miserable spy! Open the door! Out with him, I say, and don't let me have to speak again!"

Then the door was thrown open, and Rene Benoit, kicked and cuffed and hustled on all sides, was thrown out of the old warehouse. He fell sprawling on his back as the door was closed.

Staggering to his feet, he shook his clenched fist at the door.

"Never you mind, Young Klondike!" he muttered. "You'll pay for this; organize your company, take every precaution you please, but I'll get on to your secrets and I'll get square with you, too! I'll meet you in the Ketchumstock hills!"

Little did Ned Golden care for such threats as these.

Even if he had heard the fellow's mutterings as he staggered off, it is very doubtful if he would have paid the least heed.

As soon as the spy had been expelled, Young Klondike returned promptly to the business of the hour.

"All hands must show their invitations now!" he cried. "We can't have any more of this sort of thing. Dick, get around among the gentlemen and look at the letters. The Unknown will help you out."

The examination was made and the report rendered to the effect that every man was able to produce his letter.

"That settles it," cried Ned. "Now, then, gentlemen, the idea is just this: A few months ago I got the notion of interviewing the different Indian chiefs who often stray into Dawson City.

"Among others I got hold of one Black Crow, chief of a little band of Coppermine Indians, who wander about back of Circle City and whose home is in the Ketchumstock hills.

"Of course, the subject of my interview was gold—always gold. I have paid some of these chiefs large sums for information which proved to be quite worth-

less; on the other hand we have located more than one good mine in this way. From Black Crow I learn that there is a certain creek up among the Ketchumstock hills where gold can be had in great quantities. I have actually seen samples of it, if Black Crow can be believed, and to make a long story short I think it is a prospect worth looking after, but, of course, I cannot venture into the Coppermine country alone.

"There, as you all know, we are liable to meet the most dangerous Indians in Alaska; besides which, winter is coming on and all provisions will have to be carried with us; then again the Ketchumstock hills have never been explored, and it is impossible to say what dangers may be encountered. I want a company of about thirty men to go with me, and in case of success for everyone there will be a claim on this wonderful creek."

Young Klondike paused for breath and to watch the effect of his words upon the upturned faces before him.

It was easy to see that he had aroused the enthusiasm of these men to the highest pitch.

"Who'll pay expenses, boss?" asked Mat Morgan, who was nothing if not practical. "We may as well have that understood at the start."

"Then let it be understood that I will," replied Ned, "or rather the firm of Golden & Luckey will. All we want is your protection, and for that we are willing to pay."

"Now, then!" cried the Unknown, "let's organize. What shall we call ourselves, boys?"

Various names were suggested, but none of them seemed to suit all hands until Edith suddenly called out:

"I tell you what, let us call ourselves Young Klondike's Company—just that and nothing more."

"Oh, that won't do," said Dick. "We already own a mine called the Young Klondike up on El Dorado creek, as you very well know. We may want to organize that into a company some day and then we shall be sure to want to use the name."

"I think I can suggest an amendment which will fill the bill," said Dick. "Let's call this 'Young Klondike's Company K.'"

And this is the way this expedition got its name.

Dick's suggestion was unanimously adopted. It seemed to suit all hands perfectly.

Each man was then sworn in turn to be true to the company and its leader which, of course, meant Young Klondike himself.

"We shall start this day week on the Circle City steamer," said Ned, when all details were arranged. "As to supplies of all kinds we will attend to them; all I ask of you, boys, is that you will keep your mouths tight shut. Now then, success to the expedition, and good-night."

"Good-night! Good-night!" was heard on all hands and not a few called out:

"Success to Young Klondike's Company K!"

After the prospectors had departed Young Klondike with Dick, Edith, and the Unknown, returned to their hotel.

The days which immediately followed were busy ones. There were mining tools to be bought and provisions to be packed in great hampers, and a portable house to be purchased among other things, for in case of success, it was Young Klondike's intention to leave all of Company K who were willing to winter in the Ketchumstock hills behind him.

As far as he and his friends were concerned, they intended to come out of the wilderness before winter set in, for they had several other schemes on hand, and it was not Young Klondike's policy to remain long in one place.

At the beginning of his career no one could have been more faithful to a good diggings than Ned Golden, but success had crowned his efforts, and he had now passed that stage of the game.

He found it more profitable to be continually opening up new mines, some of which he sold, others being leased, and others still, retained.

On the appointed day all hands went on board the Circle City steamer and started off down the Yukon.

There was great curiosity shown by the big guns of Dawson City about the destination of Young Klondike's new company.

But Ned would not enlighten his friends and neighbors in this regard, and all with him were equally silent.

As the steamer swung around into the river Ned remarked to the Unknown that he was sure their secret had been perfectly preserved.

"Do you think so?" asked the detective, "because if you do, I don't."

"Hello! What's up now? What information have you been holding back?"

"Why, it's just this," said the Unknown. "I spent all day yesterday looking for that French spy, Rene Benoit."

"Well, and did you find him? Not that I understand what you could possibly want of the fellow, but I suppose you had your reasons just the same."

"No; I couldn't find him, but I found out where he has gone," replied the Unknown, "and my reason was just this. Before a company goes into battle it is well enough to locate the enemy. Rene Benoit and a lot of toughs went down to Circle City on a freight boat two days ago. Perhaps I'm wrong—hope I am—but all the same, it is my opinion that there's fighting ahead for Young Klondike's Company K."

CHAPTER III.

THE FIRST ATTEMPT OF THE ENEMY TO LEARN THE SECRET OF COMPANY K.

"LET Rene Benoit do his worst," remarked Young Klondike, in response to the somewhat startling statement made by the Unknown at the close of the last chapter. "We still hold a secret which he does not know."

"Ah! And what is the secret of Company K?" inquired the Unknown. "Is there anything about this expedition that I don't know?"

"Well, there is," replied Ned quietly; "there is something known only to Dick, Edith and myself, but the only reason you don't happen to know it, is because you never inquired."

The Unknown pulled off his plug hat and scratched his head with a puzzled air.

"And what is this mighty secret, may I ask?" he replied.

"It's no mighty secret, but I don't intend any of our company shall know it until I get ready to tell them—that's all."

"How about your Uncle Dudley? May he mildly inquire what it is? Not that I want to pry into private business. Oh, no! Not that at all!"

"Why, it's the name of the creek to which we are going, and where we expect to find the gold."

The Unknown clapped his plug hat back upon his head with a loud bang.

"I should think that would hurt you," laughed Edith. "No wonder you are bald, Zed."

"It's enough to make a man bald to think that I have been such a fool as never to ask where we are going."

"That's exactly what you didn't ask," replied Ned.

"All along I've been wondering the reason why."

"Do you want to know the reason why?"

"Well, I don't object. We seem to have dropped into one of our old time discussions. Fire away."

"The reason why is that I got it into my stupid noddle that you didn't know the name of said creek. Of course there must be a hundred and forty-nine creeks running out of the Ketchumstock hills."

"I think you'll find that there are a hundred and fifty; the name of ours is—but you won't give the secret away?"

"Give nothing away! Am I that kind of man?"

"Well, then, lend me your ear."

"Can't! I want it myself."

"Listen, listen! The name of our creek is——"

"Well, what?"

"Hold on now; I was just thinking that a fair exchange is no robbery. I'm a business man, and it is not good business to give something for nothing. In exchange for the name of the creek, suppose you tell me your name?"

Now this was an old joke between Ned, Dick and the Unknown.

The boys were forever trying to make the strange little detective part with his secret, but as yet they had met with no success.

Only as Zed, the short for Zedekiah, which he solemnly declared to be his Christian name, did they know the Unknown.

"Now, that's what I call taking a mean advantage of a fellow!" cried the detective. "You are perfectly well aware that my name is McGinty."

"Over the left," laughed Dick. "Zed, that won't do."

"Over in any direction you please, dear boy, and if McGinty don't suit you how would Magillicuddy do?"

"It won't do at all," said Ned. "Now, then, if you want the name of the creek to which we are going, I'm ready to give it to you any time in exchange for your own."

"I'm afraid I shall have to tell," said the detective solemnly.

"Good!" cried Edith. "It's the one desire of my life to know your name, Zed."

"Well then, wait until we get to the creek, and if I don't learn its name then, I'll let her go and give mine out at last."

"Cornered!" cried Ned. "Of course all hands will know the name of the creek by that time."

"Of course. Then I shan't have to tell mine."

"You've got the best of me—I'll give up."

"And tell the name?"

"Yes."

"Honest Injun! No fooling this time?"

"The name is an Indian one. Whether the Indian who gave it to the creek was honest or not, I'm sure I don't know, but I very much doubt it. Honest Indians are scarce."

"Come! Come! Out with it, or I shall jump overboard! I can stand it no longer!"

"Had you rather jump overboard into the Yukon than tell your name?" laughed Dick. "If you'll do the last, I'll tell you the name of the creek mighty quick."

"Will somebody tell it, or shall I give up the ghost?"

"We can't have that," said Edith, "and as Ned won't speak up, I'll tell. The name of the creek is Weenowahtah!"

"Wine and water! That's a bully name! Wish I had some now!"

"Well, that's what it is," said Ned, "and to quit joking, I have never told it to any member of Company K. I thought it would be just as well that they didn't know until we were well on our road to the Ketchumstock hills."

"Well, I perfectly agree with you, dear boy. I think it is a great deal better, for what they don't know they can't tell; but you'll find when we get to Circle City that Rene Benoit has got in ahead of you. Take my word for that."

And in this the Unknown proved to be a true prophet.

When the steamer reached Circle City, which it did without mishap, Young Klondike soon learned that Rene Benoit and a large party—some said ten and others put it as high as twenty—had gone up Welch creek in boats two days before.

Where they were heading no one seemed to know, but as Welch creek marked the first stage of the journey into that unknown land about the Ketchumstock hills, Young Klondike felt that he could readily guess.

There was nothing to be done about the matter,

however, except to prepare for trouble, and be ready to meet it when it came.

It took several days to prepare for the land journey.

It is not easy to move a large company of men, and Young Klondike felt particularly anxious to make no mistake.

The first stage of the journey was up Welch creek to its headwaters.

Beyond this no white man had ever been.

True, the Ketchumstock hills had often been seen in the distance by prospectors, but no one had ever penetrated to them.

Old hands at Circle City declared that it would be impossible to get the goods to the hills without horses, and that Young Klondike would be forced to abandon them at the head of Welch creek.

"I don't believe a word of it," Ned said to Dick, with his usual emphasis. "The country is unexplored and these fellows simply don't know what they are talking about—that's all."

"They ought to know more than we do, at all events," replied Dick.

"Nonsense! You can't believe what you hear. One tells you one thing and another another. Know what I think?"

"What?"

"That Black Crow knows more about this unknown land than all these wisecracks put together."

"Well, and what does Black Crow say about it?"

"He claims that no white man ever reached the headwaters of Welch creek; that it rises in the Ketchumstock hills."

"Well, that certainly sounds very reasonable. Does Black Crow claim that it is navigable all the way?"

"With a few postages—yes."

"This would simplify matters very much if true."

"Exactly. Let us hope it is true. What we want to do is to prove it."

Here the conversation ended, and it might just as well never have begun, for it was a fact that no one knew anything about Welch creek.

The start was made in the early morning.

Young Klondike had ordered a big raft built to carry the goods on, and upon this a few of the men went, the rest going in long canoes of Indian build, light and easily carried over the postages, and well adapted to the service to which they were to be put.

There were four of the canoes, and in the foremost was Young Klondike and his immediate party.

The first day's journey was entirely successful, and nightfall found them well on their way up the creek.

The country was hilly, and there was a good deal of tundra land on both sides of the creek.

Now this tundra land is overgrown with a species of moss, which bears the same name. It grows to an enormous height, often higher than a man's head.

In the tundras, as these patches of moss-grown swampland are termed, there is splendid duck shooting to be had, and Young Klondike's party being all

excellent shots, especially Edith, good sport was looked for, for although the season was far advanced it was not too late to hope for ducks.

But none were seen the first day, and this very much to Edith's disappointment, for she had set her heart on the sport.

There was to be no traveling by night in spite of the shortness of daylight, for Ned was fearful that the raft might go aground and that trouble would be had in working it off.

The first night camp was on the side of a little hill overlooking a long stretch of tundra.

Tents were pitched and fires built and a good supper prepared.

The long evening was spent in story telling and card playing—not gambling—that Young Klondike would not allow.

Ned had his banjo along, and as he was an excellent performer he was able to entertain the company for an hour or so.

Edith sang beautifully, and she lent her aid to the evening's entertainment in this way, and altogether they had a jolly time of it.

At nine o'clock the guard was set and all turned in and a quiet night was passed.

It was comparatively easy traveling on Welch creek.

So far it was broad and deep, although occasionally a shoal was encountered where care was necessary to avoid running the raft aground.

Emptying into it were many smaller creeks; as these all seemed to come from one side, Ned concluded that there must be a series of lakes among the hills on that side, and he felt very curious to ascertain, so he proposed to Dick that they get up early and make a run on ahead and go up the first side creek they came to and explore.

"Better be careful," said the Unknown. "We don't want to run any risks. If you must go, I'll go with you."

"We'll all go," said Edith, and that was the intention over night, but when morning came the Unknown was sleeping soundly and they hated to disturb him, so Ned, Dick and Edith started off alone.

It was not yet daylight—wouldn't be for two hours, at least, but this made no difference to our friends, as they were all well used to canoeing in the dark.

A run of half an hour brought them to a broad creek, which ran in out of the tundra and into this they turned the canoe.

"I'm sure we shall find a lake in here," declared Ned. "It must be; there is no other way in which this creek could exist, for there are no hills over in this direction in which it can take its rise."

"If there is a lake it can't be very far away," said Dick, "probably not more than a mile."

They pushed on and soon found themselves involved in a perfect maze of "slews" as they are called.

The tundra seemed to spread everywhere, and in-

stead of one creek there were water ways opening off in every direction.

Before they knew it they became involved in this labyrinth and scarcely knew in what direction to turn to get back to Welch creek.

"This won't do," said Ned. "I think we ought to go back at once."

"If we try that we shall surely get lost," declared Edith. "You know we've been lost in the tundra before and I don't care for a similar experience again."

"Why, we are lost now, as far as that goes," said Dick. "It can't be any worse."

"Oh, I don't think so," declared Ned. "I'm pretty sure I could find the way back even in the dark, and I'd like to bet there will be no trouble in the light."

"We'd better wait for daylight," said Dick emphatically. "Let's keep on a little way until we come to a place where we can land, and then go ashore and wait for the sun."

This plan was adopted, and after running up the slew a little further, carefully noting the different cross slews as they passed them, they came to a sort of island in the tundra, where the ground rose about three feet above the water's level.

Here the canoe was pulled ashore, and they all sat down to wait for daylight, and feeling rather uncomfortable about their situation, it must be owned.

Ned tried his best to keep up the spirits of his friends.

He laughed and joked and made light of the whole matter, although feeling quite as much worried as Dick, for he knew very well the difficulty of getting out of the tundra once you lose your way.

Adventurous hunters who take chances in these Alaskan tundras sometimes wander about for days before they can make their escape, and not a few have gone into these moss mazes and never been heard of again.

Just before daylight, while Ned was telling a funny story, a flock of ducks suddenly rose back of the island.

The boys seized their rifles but were too late to get a shot.

Not so Edith. She brought down a fine duck, taking it on the wing.

It fell into the tundra, and Ned, who had marked the place with his eye as well as he could, rushed into the moss to get it.

In an instant he was out of sight, for the moss was considerably higher than his head.

"I'm afraid I shan't be able to get that duck," he thought. "Pity, too, for we need all the fresh provisions we can lay our hands on. Hello! There it is now!"

In the dim light he caught sight of something fluttering among the moss, and stooped down to seize it, when a man suddenly rose up out of the tundra and seized him by the throat, at the same time clapping a heavy hand over his mouth.

"Now I've got you, Young Klondike!" he hissed. "If you make one sound you're a dead man! Give

up the secret of your prospect in the Ketchumstock hills if you want to live!"

CHAPTER IV.

RESCUED BY THE UNKNOWN.

It was terribly startling. Ned had been taken entirely unawares.

He struggled all he knew, but could not shake off that iron hand.

Tighter and tighter those terrible fingers fastened themselves about his throat until everything grew black about him.

Poor Ned had been choked into unconsciousness, which no doubt was the man's intention from the start.

If it had been lighter Ned might have recognized his assailant as Rene Benoit, for it was the big Canadian and no one else.

"I've fixed him," he chuckled. "He's not dead. He'll come to by the time I get him into camp. This is clear luck! Who would ever have thought that he would run right into my arms like this. I could scarcely believe it when I saw him coming toward me through the moss."

Thus muttering Benoit picked up the unconscious boy, and throwing him on his back as one would handle a sack of meal, walked off through the moss as easily as if he was carrying no load at all.

He had not far to go. Five minutes brought him to a place where a strip of clear ground ran along the edge of another slew.

Here there was a fire, with a number of men lying asleep around it.

"Wake up, boys; wake up!" cried Benoit. "I'm in with a prize!"

Several roused up, and there was a shout of triumph when they saw Ned.

"Why, it's Young Klondike himself!" cried one. "You don't mean to say you've captured the king pin of the famous Company K?"

"That's what I have," declared Benoit triumphantly, at the same time dropping Ned upon the ground.

"Is he dead? Have you shot him?"

"No, I haven't shot him, Martin Dill. What would I do that for? What we want is to find out the secret of these famous diggings in the Ketchumstock hills, and no dead man is going to tell us that."

"Hanged if he don't look as though he was dead," growled Dill. "I know something about those long fingers of yours, you blamed strangler. The boy will do well if he comes to life again and—hello! He's coming to now, just to make me out a liar, that's always the way."

Apparently Martin Dill was a cronic growler and a great talker at that.

Benoit paid no attention to him. Going to the slew he filled an empty tomato can with water and

dashed it in Ned's face, which instantly revived him.

Benoit and Dill were searching his pockets and taking possession of everything of any value as his scattered senses returned.

"Where's your money? Hain't you got none?" growled Dill. "Why don't you speak instead of staring at us like a blamed old owl?"

"I've got nothing to say to you, gentlemen," stammered Ned, trying his best to be cool. "Help yourselves to my things. Take all—be sure and not leave anything behind you. Money I don't happen to carry with me, so you'll be disappointed on that score."

"I don't believe you," said Benoit, planting a revolver at Young Klondike's head. Fork over or I'll blow your brains out. Come now! Be quick!"

Now Ned had more than a thousand dollars tucked away in a secret pocket, but he made up his mind that there would be no killing and he had the courage to face it out.

"You'll not get any money from me," he declared. "Search as much as you please."

"B'gosh, you're a cool one!" exclaimed Martin Dill. "You don't seem to be a bit afraid of getting shot."

"That's right; I'm not afraid."

"I've a blame good mind to shoot you anyway, just on account of your impudence," said Benoit. "I haven't forgotten the treatment I received at that meeting of yours, my fine young gentleman—eh, no!"

"You brought it on yourself. What business had you to come to the meeting unasked?"

"It was all business with me, boss. I wanted to find out what was going on."

"Well, you didn't find out, did you?"

"No, I didn't, but I found out enough."

"Sure?"

"Yes, sure—enough to bring me here, and I propose to find out the balance now."

"Oh, you do, eh? Well, who's going to tell you?"

"You are."

"Not on your life!"

"Then yours will pay the forfeit."

"What will you make by killing me? Nothing. And why should you do it? I never harmed you."

All the men were up by this time and had gathered around Ned, who now got up and faced them as calmly as if he had been surrounded by his own men of Company K.

"Gentlemen, it's no use," he said. "You cannot make me give away this secret. Threaten all you like, kill me if you will, but the secret of the location of my new prospect in the Ketchumstock hills will never be told."

"You're the coolest card I ever struck," said Dill. "Rene, better settle this job up offhand. Let it be one—two—three!"

Again Rene Benoit raised the revolver and covered Ned.

"One! Will you tell?" he cried.

"No!" said Ned, stoutly. "I will not tell!"

"Two! Will you tell?" said the Frenchman again, in a voice as threatening as can well be imagined.

"No!"

The reply was just as decided.

"Three! Will you tell? I shall fire if you say no."

Ned folded his arms and faced the wretch with flashing eyes.

"No!" he said, firmly.

Rene instantly fired, but purposely sent the bullet above Young Klondike's head.

Ned smiled sarcastically.

"There you are, Rene Benoit," he said. "I told you how it would be. My secret is my salvation. You will not kill me while it remains untold."

"Ned! Ned! Where are you, Ned?"

Dick's voice could be heard calling.

There was some one coming through the tundra.

"Look out for yourself! I'm captured!" shouted Ned. "Take care, Dick."

"There's the other one!" cried Rene. "Catch him, boys. If one won't tell, the other will."

Off they rushed into the tundra, but four remained behind to guard Young Klondike, Rene Benoit among them.

What the outcome might have been if a sudden diversion had not occurred, it is hard to say, but just at that moment shot after shot came flying in among the men, and a thunderous voice shouted:

"This way, gentlemen! Here they are! Shoot 'em down!"

Instantly Young Klondike recognized the voice of the Unknown.

Help was at hand if he could but avail himself of it, but Ned was sure that the detective was alone.

If Benoit and his companions had guessed this, there would have been no such chance as came for Ned to make his escape.

"The whole gang is upon us!" cried Benoit, starting for the tundra. "We've got to skip!"

The instant he let go his hold on Ned, our hero, with one spring overtook him, and striking out from the shoulder dealt the rascal a terrible blow, which sent him sprawling to the ground.

As for the other three, they ran into the tundra as fast as their legs could carry them, and were out of sight by the time the little detective came paddling up in his canoe.

He was all alone just as Ned had supposed.

"Hello! Hello!" he shouted. "By the Jumping Jeremiah, what's all this? Have they all run away?"

"That's what," replied Ned. "Quick! We've got to look to Dick and Edith! The trouble isn't over yet!"

But it was, for at the same instant Dick rushed out of the tundra followed by Edith.

"What's it all about, Ned? Who are they? Where are they?" he cried.

"Why, they all seem to be gone except Benoit—thunder! He's gone, too! Crawled off into the moss, as I'm a sinner! Well, let him go! He can do no

more harm now. I guess we four will be able to hold our own even if they do take it into their heads to come back and try it again."

But there was no return of the toughs.

Young Klondike and his friends remained on the spot for some little time to give them a chance for an attack if they were disposed to make it, for they all felt that the fight might as well be fought out to a finish then and there.

Finding that they were not likely to come back, they all got into the Unknown's canoe and paddled off down the slew.

"I knew perfectly well that there would be trouble if you went off without me," declared the detective. "By the Jumping Jeremiah, I felt it in my bones."

"So as soon as you woke up and found that we had gone you started after us, I suppose," replied Ned. "Well, I've got nothing to say. You have served me a good turn."

Now the sun rose and all felt better in the light.

Dick reported that he had seen nothing of the toughs, so it was clear that they must have missed him in the high moss.

Hearing the shot Dick became alarmed and started after Ned.

"I'd have made it hot for them if I could once have got a sight of the scoundrels," he declared.

"What about our canoe?" inquired Edith. "Are we going to abandon that?"

"Where is it?" inquired the Unknown.

"How can we tell you?" replied Dick. "All these slews look alike. I only hope you know your way out of here."

"Indeed I do," said the detective. "I'm not so young that I would come into a hole like this and not look where I'm going—oh, no!"

"And you can take us back to Welch creek?"

"Certainly, I can."

"Bully for you!" cried Dick. "We're stupid, I'll admit, but we did lose our way. Well, it's a great thing to have a detective to look out for us. I'll be hanged if it ain't; but come, we must work our way around into the other slew and get our canoe, for we certainly have no canoes to throw away on Rene Benoit's gang."

This proved to be easier said than done, for the different slews formed a regular Chinese puzzle, but at last they had the satisfaction of seeing the canoe ahead of them.

It lay there on the bank undisturbed, so it was pretty evident that Benoit's gang had not found it.

Soon they had it in tow, and the start back to Welch creek was made.

In spite of the Unknown's boast, it proved a very difficult matter to find the creek again, and it was nearly noon when they struck it.

"Now, then, for Company K!" cried the detective. "I don't suppose they have gone ahead."

Again the Unknown counted without his host.

They paddled down to the place where the camp had been only to find it deserted.

There was no sign anywhere of Young Klondike's Company K.

CHAPTER V.

WHERE IS COMPANY K?

"COME, now! I don't like this!" exclaimed the Unknown. "I should think that Mat Morgan would have had sense enough to wait for us."

"I suppose he thought that we would be right back and could follow him up," said Ned. "I don't blame Mat a bit. I should have done just the same."

"Well, that's just what we've got to do," said Dick, "and the sooner we start the better. Just like as not they'll get off into some slew and lose themselves in the tundra. I never imagined that we were going to strike a place like this."

And there was really more danger than even Dick imagined, as they very soon discovered.

Before they had gone far they came to a point where the creek ran directly through the tundra.

It now lost its definite form, and was divided into a dozen branches.

Slews ran in among the moss in every direction, and it was anything but an easy matter to tell which was the main creek.

As they saw nothing of the raft Ned began to grow decidedly alarmed.

Again and again they shouted in the hope their cries might be heard, but no answer came back to them, and the situation began to look grave.

"I can't understand where they have got to!" pondered the Unknown. "Of course, some of the canoes may have run ahead out of hearing, but I don't see how the raft could have got so far away from us. We must have come up here twice as fast as they did. By this time we ought to be within hailing distance sure. There can be only one explanation, they've got off into the slews."

"We've got to find them," said Ned. "We must keep at it. Do you consider this the main stream still, Dick?"

"Well, yes, I think so."

"Then we'll keep right on. This tundra can't last forever. You see there are hills on there ahead."

"How far off do you make them?" asked Edith.

"Oh, I should say not more than two miles," replied Ned, "but it's hard to tell; this moss deceives the eye, and when one looks along over it all distances are foreshortened. It may be five miles to the hills."

It proved to be all of that; they kept steadily on, using the greatest precaution to keep to the main creek.

This could be determined, Ned thought, by the stronger current than was to be seen in the slews, and he proved his theory, for at last they came out of the tundra at the base of the hills, and the creek resumed its proper form once more.

But nothing had been seen of the raft, and the situation was anything but pleasant.

There could no longer be a doubt that Company K was lost in the slews.

"It won't pay to go any further," said Ned. "I think the best thing we can do is to tie up here and go up to the top of the hill; there we can get a look over the tundra, and perhaps may be able to see something of the raft."

"How about dinner?" exclaimed the Unknown. "I'm as hungry as a wolf."

"Any man who says dinner will be promptly expelled from the company," laughed Ned. "Who knows better than you do that we haven't a thing to eat?"

"Hush! We'll have something in a minute, though," breathed Edith, raising her rifle.

"Where? What do you see?" asked Ned.

Instead of replying, Edith fired three shots in quick succession.

The first brought an immense flock of ducks up from the creek, but one was left behind to bear witness to Edith's good marksmanship, and two more dropped back into the creek.

"That's business!" cried the Unknown. "Roast duck is all right. I'll stay behind and attend to the dinner, while you boys go up the hill."

But Edith would not hear to this.

"I'll do it all," she said. "You go on with the boys."

"And leave you alone after what happened this morning? Ye gods and little fishes—no!"

"You'd better stay, Zed. Dick and I won't be long gone," said Ned, and it was so arranged, and they started up the hill.

From the top a fine view of the big swamp could be had. They were able to travel many of its water ways, but nothing could be seen of the raft.

"It's very strange," mused Dick; "very, very strange. What can have become of them? Ned, it isn't possible that those fellows took the back track and made off with our goods?"

"Never! I'd trust Mat Morgan anywhere!"

"He might have been overpowered by numbers. It was a good chance to shake us if any of them had any other diggings in mind."

"No, no, Dick, I won't believe it. Those men were chosen with the greatest care. As you know very well, not a few of them have been out with us before, and would not go back on us under any consideration. This is the result of accident, not of design."

For a few moments the boys just stood there, not knowing what to say or do, when all once Ned exclaimed:

"I've hit it! I really believe I've hit it! I can explain the whole affair."

"Out with it, then, for we surely want to know."

"The Unknown never told where he was going. We had gone, and did not come back. It's my opinion that Morgan started up the slews after us, following very close in our track."

"What, raft and all?"

"Perhaps the raft was tied up somewhere, and the boys went ahead in the canoes; but what I'm getting at is this, Dick; we've been looking off to the southeast, thinking that they probably went that way, as it is perfectly natural to think, whereas if they followed us they would go to the northwest, don't you see?"

"That's true enough, and if you're right they may be at no very great distance from us now."

"Exactly; the slews on that side lie at our feet, and their windings followed might easily take Company K this way; let's build a big signal fire and see what the result is. At all events I can't see any use in moving out of here until we know in what direction we ought to go."

This seemed sound reasoning, and it was decided to build the fire at once.

Plenty of dry wood lay scattered about under a clump of trees near by, and while Dick gathered it into a pile Ned hurried down the hill and told the detective their plan.

"It will locate us for the enemy," mused the Unknown. "I don't know what to say."

"But enemy or no enemy, we have got to find our friends, I suppose."

"That's so, also. Build it. Let her go."

"Bring the ducks up on the hill, Edith, and we'll all stay together. We might as well use the fire to roast the birds."

So they all went up on the hill and a roaring fire was built, but of course, no duck roasting could be done in that, so a smaller fire was built between two stones, and then a sharp stick was run through each duck and balanced upon forked stakes driven into the ground in such a way as to bring the ducks directly over the fire.

The boys took turns in working these primitive spits; the ducks were tumbled over and over, and at last were as nicely roasted as if they had been done in an oven.

Meanwhile a sharp lookout had been kept over the tundra for smoke, but as yet none had been seen.

"It begins to look as though we should have to give it up," said the Unknown, "but that's no reason why we shouldn't have dinner. I say let's eat now."

So the ducks were carved with Ned's big jackknife and divided around and fine eating they proved to be.

While they were still at it the Unknown suddenly sprang to his feet with a loud shout.

"Smoke! By the Jumping Jeremiah, smoke! See it! Off there on the tundra about a mile away!"

"That's what it is," said Ned, taking a look through his glass. "It rises right out of the tundra. Some one has started a big fire there sure."

"Friends or foes?" exclaimed the Unknown. "Would that I knew!"

Young Klondike examined the smoke long and earnestly.

"There is something red this side of it," he said at

last. "Look, Zed, your eyes are sharper than mine when it comes to distance."

The detective took the glass and after a long examination announced that he could see the Canadian flag waving on a pole.

"That's what I thought it was," said Ned. "That means Company K."

"Wonder if it surely does?" questioned Dick. "Looks to me like a man's red shirt drying."

"Mat Morgan had a big flag with him."

"And Mat is a thorough Canuck. I reckon you are right. Still it looks like a shirt all the same."

"The place where that fire is, although right in the tundra, is at no great distance from the base of those high, wooded hills," remarked Ned, pointing to a range of hills in some parts covered with snow, which lay about ten miles away.

"Can those be the Ketchumstock hills?" asked Edith.

"The lower end of them, yes," replied Ned. "I shouldn't wonder at all if it was so."

"But we were not to go there?"

"No, no! Our destination lies at the headwaters of Welch creek. That would bring us a good fifteen miles up from that end of the range."

After some further discussion it was determined to take the canoe, and make an effort to reach the point where the signal fire had been built.

Paddling back down the creek they turned into the first slew which opened off in that direction, and started in on their perilous hunt.

And it was an undertaking much more perilous than one would imagine.

To be lost in the slews at any season of the year was bad enough, but now with snow liable to come at any time such a mishap would be a very serious matter, for following on snow might come an early winter, and that would be very liable to mean death, for to be frozen in the slews without food could not very well mean anything else.

There was not much talking done, as Young Klondike's party paddled on up the slew in the light of the descending sun.

The smoke could still be seen and seemed to grow nearer as they advanced. Every effort must be made to reach it before night came on, for if there was failure in this there was no telling what the result might be.

"We are holding our own it seems to me," said Ned at last. "It certainly looks as though we were gaining on that smoke."

"We've got to go over now," said the detective, gloomily. "We can't get back to the creek before dark."

"I suppose," asked Dick, "that somebody is counting the cross slews and paying particular attention to all that sort of thing?"

"That's my job," said the detective, "and don't you think I'm not doing it to the very best of my ability?"

"Think you can pilot us back again?"

"Yes, I'm sure of it."

"In the dark?"

"Don't promise that. If it gets dark before we reach the boys we shall have to tie up somewhere for the night; there is no other way."

This was a gloomy prospect, and it turned out one which was destined to be realized.

Before they had gone much further the smoke suddenly disappeared.

For some time the column had been growing thinner and thinner, and now it vanished with a final puff.

"That's a bad job," said the Unknown. "Now we've got nothing at all to guide us. I'm afraid we're in for it, boys."

"Push ahead! Push ahead" exclaimed Young Klondike. "We may strike them yet before night comes on."

Now, although Ned spoke cheerfully, and did it because he wanted to encourage his friends, he was very far from being encouraged himself.

Indeed the situation looked blacker than ever, and Ned had now no hope of reaching the camp of Company K before the rising of another sun.

"We may as well push on until we come to some place where there is dry ground enough for us to sleep on," said the Unknown, at last. "It is getting decidedly colder, and you can see for yourselves that there is surely going to be a storm."

"Don't croak, Zed," said Edith. "Time enough to cross our bridges when we come to them. We shall have to stay in the tundra, of course. I am quite prepared for that, but it won't kill us. We've done it before now."

"Yes, and may have to do it again," said Ned, paddling vigorously. "I don't mind. We can rig up some sort of shelter and first thing to-morrow I've no doubt we shall find the boys."

It grew darker and darker; night was soon upon them; a cold, bleak wind came sweeping over the tundra, chilling our prospectors so thoroughly that Ned and Dick could scarcely keep their hold on the paddles.

Still they came to no place where a landing was to be even thought of. It was all moss and water and mud; again and again the Unknown struck his steering paddle in among that strange growth which covered everything, but it always came out plastered with mud.

By common consent perfect silence was maintained.

If it took all night it would be necessary to keep on going until a landing could be made.

The actual time was a few moments before four o'clock, but this means darkness in the Klondike country at this time of year, as is well known.

Until half-past five there was no change in the situation, and then all at once the canoe passed out of that maze of moss, and a low island lay before them, a desolate place enough, but still one where they could pass the night better than in the canoe.

"Hooray!" shouted Ned. "We've got there at

last! Run her nose ashore, Dick! There! That's the talk! Now, help me to get her up out of the water, and we'll just do the best we can."

The island was raised above the level of the slews only a few feet and in size was not over a quarter of a mile across.

On all sides of it that horrible mass rose to obstruct their vision. There was not a tree nor a shrub in sight; only the muddy soil. It almost looked as if some convulsion of Nature had suddenly forced the island up out of the slews.

"First of all, boys, we want to explore!" cried the Unknown, as soon as the canoe was secured, "and by the Jumping Jeremiah, I've made a discovery right now!"

"What?" asked Edith, staring about. "What can you see in the dark more than anyone else?"

"Light!" replied the Unknown, gravely. "Sparks right over there!"

And sure enough, right ahead of them faint points of light could be discerned glowing dimly close down to the ground.

They hurried to the place and found the remains of a fire.

An immense quantity of tundra moss had recently been burned there, if one could judge by the pile of ashes which lay scattered about.

"This is where the fire was," said the Unknown, very decidedly.

It certainly had that appearance, and the more they thought about it the more firmly convinced all became that such was the case.

But there was no sign of a human being near them. Again and again they shouted; again and again shots were fired, in the hope of bringing some answering signal, but it was all in vain.

Somebody had been there, somebody had built the fire, but Young Klondike was to all appearance just as far as ever from solving that momentous question; "Where was Company K?"

CHAPTER VI.

THE ATTACK ON THE RAFT.

"It is going to snow," remarked the Unknown, "but it may hold off until morning; for all our sakes let us hope that it will."

This remark was made after the preparations for the night were all complete.

These were as simple as they were unsatisfactory. Prospecting in the unknown parts of the Klondike country, late in the season, is certainly no joke.

For Edith's accommodation a large quantity of moss was gathered and spread upon the ground.

Then the canoe was turned over on its side as a protection from the wind, and Edith, wrapping herself up in her blankets, lay down on the moss.

The plucky girl declared that she was warm and

comfortable, and she must have been fairly so for she was soon fast asleep.

As for Dick and the Unknown they would have scorned to gather moss for their own accommodation. They just wrapped themselves up in their blankets and lay down upon the damp ground, each with one of the seats out of the canoe as a pillow.

It is not everybody who could go to sleep under these circumstances, but Dick and the Unknown did it, and that within five minutes' time.

It was Ned's watch, and rifle in hand he paced the soggy ground.

Harder and harder the wind blew; it seemed to grow colder, but still the cold did not increase as rapidly as Ned thought it would at sundown, and he began to hope that after all they might escape the snow.

"I begin to think that I was a fool to come in here at this time of year," he pondered. "Of course we shall work out of this snap somehow; we always do, but if anything serious happens to those poor fellows, I shall never forgive myself for bringing them into this wretched country. This is a job for spring and not for late in the fall. I should have thought of that before I started out."

These gloomy thoughts did not make our bold prospector any more cheerful, of course, and after a little Ned bravely put them away.

"There's no use in this," he reflected. "I must make a routine if I want to keep awake and keep my wits about me. I'll go around the island ten times."

As a matter of fact, they had not been around it once yet, although a hasty survey had been made when they first came ashore.

Now this was certainly wrong. The Unknown should have carried out his plan of thoroughly exploring the island, and there was no better way of doing this than to make the entire circuit of the shore.

This Ned now started in to do, and it led to strange results almost at the start, for he had not gone a hundred yards away from the landing place before he caught sight of the prow of a canoe projecting an inch or so out of the moss on the other side of the surrounding slew.

"Hello! Hello! What's this?" he muttered. "Can there be some one in there?"

For a few moments he stood watching the prow, but there was no movement to the canoe.

"If there is anyone in that thing they must be asleep," thought Ned. "I'm going to pull that canoe ashore."

He hurried back to the spot where their belongings had been piled up when their own canoe was turned over on its side.

From among these he selected a rope and returned to the point where he had made his discovery.

Tying a big knot on the end of the rope by making several small ones in the same place, he threw it into the canoe and gently pulled. The knot caught under the bows and held fast and Ned was able to pull the canoe across the slew to the place where he stood.

There was no one in it, but the canoe seemed wonderfully heavy, and the weight was all astern, where a great quantity of moss lay piled up.

"That's gold!" thought Ned, the moment he felt this weight.

He pulled the bow of the canoe far up on the shore, and hastily removed the moss.

It proved to be just as he had supposed.

There were two bags in the stern of the canoe.

Ned hastily opened them; both were filled with golden nuggets almost to the brim.

In the first excitement of this discovery, Young Klondike was on the point of waking up Dick.

But upon consulting his watch he found that Dick still had a full hour's sleep before him, according to the arrangement, and he concluded to let him remain where he was.

Further examination of the canoe showed Ned that it was unquestionably of Indian build. Certainly it was not one of his, for they were all of an entirely different bottom.

The question now was to whom the canoe belonged.

Leaving the gold where it was, Young Klondike resumed his march around the island; but there was another discovery to be made before very long.

As he was passing a point nearly opposite the remains of the fire on the other side of the island, Ned suddenly heard a sound which certainly did not seem to come from either the Unknown or Dick.

It was a snore—a very decided snore, but when he listened again he could not hear it at all.

"Strange," muttered Ned. "It doesn't seem as if I could hear the Unknown snore down here, and yet it must have been him."

It was quite a little distance to the top of the rise where the Unknown lay.

Ned listened attentively, but could hear no more snoring. Then thinking that after all it must have been the Unknown, he resumed his walk, going entirely around the island without hearing another sound, until he came back again to the same point, where he heard the snore again.

"This beats me!" thought Ned. "I'll soon find out whether that's the Unknown or not!"

He listened attentively, but as before, the snoring was not repeated.

Then he went straight up on top of the rise to where Dick and the Unknown lay.

They were both sleeping quietly, and not snoring at all.

"Mystery!" muttered Ned. "A big mystery, and I am going to solve it. I wonder can there be a dugout down there?"

Now by a dugout Young Klondike did not mean a canoe hollowed out of a single log, as may be supposed.

Nothing of the sort. Among the Coppermine Indians it is much the custom in the winter to dig a hole in the ground and make a sort of underground chamber for sleeping.

This, of course is only done when the Indians are on the march. In their regular encampments the Coppermines have skin lodges like other tribes.

Looking about Ned soon discovered a pile of moss back up the slope a little way from shore.

He had seen this before, but thought it was only some of the moss which had been dropped there by whoever built the fire, but now he kicked it away and found that it covered a board.

"A dugout sure enough," he thought. "There's an Indian down there fast enough. Now, I want Dick and I must have him. It won't do to take my chances here alone."

He hurried up the hill, and rousing Dick told him of the two discoveries, and together they returned to the board.

They came at a fortunate time, for now a good hard snoring was going on and it kept right up, too.

"Yes, there's an Indian down there fast enough," said Dick. "I hope to goodness there isn't more than one, for I don't care to get up a fight here in the dark."

"Suppose we leave him till morning?" suggested Ned.

"But we ought to know what this means."

"If you say so I'll call the Unknown and Edith."

"What do you say yourself? I'll leave it to you."

"I say go ahead right now."

"Then go ahead it is!" exclaimed Dick, and stooping down he lifted the board.

The snoring instantly ceased.

It was so dark that the boys could not see very distinctly, but it seemed to them that down in the shallow hole they could make out the form of a man all crouched up.

"Hello, down there! Hello!" cried Ned.

"Ugh! Ugh!"

The answer came promptly enough. It was an unmistakable Indian grunt.

"You want to come out of that!" called Ned.

"We won't hurt you! Come out!"

"No kill!" growled a voice down in the hole. "No kill!"

"No kill!" repeated Ned, very decidedly. "You needn't be afraid."

Then there was a great scrambling, and an old Indian with long, snow-white hair, pulled himself up out of the dugout, and stood before the boys, winking and blinking, evidently very much afraid.

"Hello, old man! Who are you?" demanded Ned.

"Ugh, ugh!" growled the Indian, staring at the boys and fumbling for his knife.

"Now, now; don't draw any knife! We don't want trouble," said Ned. "You keep quiet and we won't hurt you. Do you understand what I say?"

"Ugh," grunted the savage, who was one of the true Coppermine breed.

"Do you speak English?"

"Ugh! Me speakee Inglis—Ugh!"

"What's your name?"

"Grey Wolf," replied the Indian, beginning to feel reassured.

"Are you here alone?"

"Ugh!"

"Where's your tribe?"

"No have. Me old—very old. Me run away."

"Hello! So that your relations would not bury you alive, you buried yourself—that it?" demanded Ned, remembering that it was one of the pleasing customs of the Coppermine Indians to bury the aged of their tribe.

Then a long conversation followed, to give which in detail would be decidedly tedious.

It turned out that Grey Wolf could speak very good English, and when we have occasion to quote him again, as we shall, we shall render his speech into perfect English as it will be easier to read.

The upshot of his disclosures was highly interesting.

The old man had made his escape from his tribe for fear of being buried, and determined to make his way to Circle City and take up his residence with the whites among whom he had lived before.

Before doing this, Grey Wolf had made a very sensible move. Happening to know where there was gold to be had, he went there and washed out the two bags of nuggets, feeling that this would help to keep him through the winter in Circle City. He was on his way there when, feeling very much fatigued, he tied up on the island and made himself a dugout, hiding his canoe in the tundra, which he had hardly done when two canoes, filled with white men came along.

The men landed on the island and built a big fire, cooking dinner and making themselves comfortable, after which they went on their way without having discovered Grey Wolf who took care to keep himself concealed.

"Rene Benoit's gang, of course!" declared Ned, after Grey Wolf had given an accurate description of the men.

There could be little doubt of it, and Young Klondike could only congratulate himself upon their narrow escape.

Gray Wolf had seen nothing of the raft or the other party. As the conversation proceeded the old fellow grew quite friendly.

"Come with us, Grey Wolf, and help us find our friends," proposed Ned, at last. "Show us where you dug that gold and I'll take you back with us to Dawson City, and see that you are well taken care of until spring."

"Ha! The gold will do that!" was the reply.

"Yes, but you will lose the gold. You'll be robbed of it before you have been in Circle City a week. Do as I tell you and I will give you more gold and keep you all winter. I'll give you good clothes and everything you want. I'll make you a rich man."

To make Grey Wolf comprehend all these fine promises required considerable talk, but at last he consented and promised to guide them to the place where he had found the gold.

After this agreeable understanding had been reached, Grey Wolf went back to his dugout and went to sleep, but Dick and Ned watched until morning. As the latter did not feel a bit sleepy the Unknown was not called at all.

Morning brought no light with it—that could not be looked for until after nine o'clock—but the Unknown was up by six and Edith awoke soon after.

Before either of them got up Grey Wolf had come out of the hole and built up a big fire of moss, over which he proceeded to broil two fish which he pulled up out of the slew in the dark without any effort at all.

"Who in the world have we here?" demanded the Unknown, duly surprised to see the old Indian bending over the fire.

Ned told his story, and when Edith woke up he told it again.

"Good job we found him," said the detective. "If we don't find Company K we'll go prospecting on our own account. I suppose you haven't heard a thing?"

"No," replied Ned, sadly. "I only wish I had something to report."

"The snow holds off well, don't it?"

"It does."

"It's a-coming, though. What does Grey Wolf say about it?"

"He says it's coming sure," said Dick. "What's that red over against the sky? The reflection of our fire, think?"

"Why, no, it can't be that," said Ned. "It must be another fire. Grey Wolf, look there!"

"Ugh! white men," said Grey Wolf. "They are getting their breakfast."

"Are you sure it's white men?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"They are blowing the fire. Indians can make the tundra burn without that."

Here was something which none of Young Klondike's party would have discovered if they had watched the red light for a week.

"How do you know? What makes you say that?" asked Young Klondike.

Grey Wolf explained that the light was moving; that it was slightly bending in one direction.

They watched and found that it was so.

"Now, they have stopped blowing," said Grey Wolf. "Now the tundra burns."

Sure enough, the light had straightened up and seemed to shoot higher than it had done before.

There was no longer any wind, or these close observations could not have been made by Grey Wolf or any other man, red or white, but it was still cold and raw, and certainly there was a feeling of snow in the air.

Grey Wolf prophesied that the storm would come at daylight, and this made an immediate move all the more desirable.

Before starting, however, Ned went into a detailed

description of just where the disappearance of the raft had taken place, and at last had the satisfaction of seeing that he had made Grey Wolf understand.

"Those are your friends," said the Indian, emphatically, as he pointed toward the light.

"How do you know?" demanded the Unknown.

"They must have gone into the slews on the right of the creek," asserted Grey Wolf, "because if they had gone in on the left you could have seen them from the hill. If they did go in on the right and followed on because they lost their way and could not turn back, by the time night came they would be just about where you see that light now."

In his own way this is the explanation Grey Wolf gave, and it seemed so reasonable to Young Klondike that he accepted it offhand, and even the Unknown had not a word to offer in objection.

So the canoes were launched, and they pushed off up the slew, with Grey Wolf in the lead.

Brighter and brighter grew the light as they continued to advance.

Grey Wolf took turnings, which it is hardly likely they would have dared to take alone, but it was most fortunate that they were taken, for all at once they swung around into the narrow slew, and there saw the fire right ahead of them, and the big raft tied up alongside of a small island, similar to the one on which they had passed the night.

Beyond was the fire and a group of men gathered around it.

The light shone on their faces, and Young Klondike could see that they were the men of Company K.

Almost at the same instant Grey Wolf suddenly caught hold of Ned and pulled him down into the bottom of the canoe.

"Down! down!" he exclaimed, in a whisper, and the word was passed to the others.

Not a moment too soon did they drop and stop paddling, for out of the tundra, on ahead, two canoes shot, and pulled toward the raft with muffled oars.

"Rene Benoit again!" breathed Ned.

A man of Company K sprang upon the raft.

"Who goes there?" he cried.

Up went the rifles in the two canoes, and a volley was fired at the solitary figure on the raft.

CHAPTER VII.

THE FIRST STRIKE.

Of course, it was perfectly apparent that the plan of Rene Benoit was to capture the raft and tow it off into the tundra.

This would give the enemy all the supplies of Company K, and would have been a rich haul, indeed.

And very likely the bold scheme might have succeeded, if help had not been so close at hand.

The man on the raft fell wounded, and in an instant the attacking party were alongside.

"Keep back there! Keep back there!" yelled Rene Benoit, as the men of Company K sprang up and made a rush for the place where the raft lay moored.

The shots began to fly on both sides.

Mat Morgan rallied his men, and made a rush as Rene Benoit started to board the raft.

As yet not one of the attacking party had looked behind them—they had no idea that Young Klondike was so near.

"Now, then!" breathed Ned. "All together!"

They had their rifles ready and were only waiting for a favorable moment.

It had come! A volley of shots flew across the raft from behind.

"Good Heavens! It is Young Klondike himself!" cried Rene Benoit in French, as he looked back and caught sight of the two canoes.

After that there was a stampede.

The canoes of the enemy disappeared among the tundra in a twinkling.

Oh, what a shout went up then!

The men of Company K cheered and cheered, and ran down on board the raft to meet their leader, as the canoes were paddled up alongside.

As for the enemy, they seemed to have utterly vanished, but once the tundra swallows up a canoe it is not much use trying to follow. With slews and cross slews there is no difficulty in making one's escape.

So Ned and Dick made no effort to follow up Rene Benoit and his gang.

They were only too glad to get back to Company K again to waste any time on a chase which was almost sure to prove unprofitable.

When Mat Morgan told his story it turned out to be just as they had supposed in the first place.

Expecting that Young Klondike and his party would follow them, Morgan decided to start ahead, and he never knew that he was not still following Welch creek until they found themselves hopelessly lost.

"We stick together after this," declared Young Klondike. "There shall be no running off any more—it don't pay."

Of course, the story of Grey Wolf was duly told, and the gold in the boat exhibited.

It drove the prospectors of Company K half wild.

"Boys, I want to propose a change of plan!" said Young Klondike, calling Company K about him. "We are a long way out of our road if we want to reach that part of the Ketchumstock hills which lies at the headwaters of Welch creek, but if we keep ahead in this direction a few miles further we shall strike the lower end of the Ketchumstocks where this gold came from. I say let us do it, for if we spend all our time in getting to the diggings, winter will catch us before we know where we are. Anyone got any objection to make, because if they have let him make it now."

"I agree!" cried Dick.

"And I!" added the Unknown.

"Speaking for my mates I would like to ask a

question," said Mat Morgan. "For myself I say I'll go wherever Young Klondike wants to lead us, if it is to the moon."

"Ask as many questions as you like, Mat," replied Ned. "I want the boys to be thoroughly satisfied before we go into this new deal."

"Are you giving up a sure thing for an uncertainty—that's what we want to know," said Mat. "On that score we don't want to make any mistake."

"No," replied Ned, emphatically. "I tell you now, boys, that my prospect was not a sure thing by any means. In fact it rests on precisely such evidence as this new prospect does, the testimony of a Coppermine Indian."

"You say you saw the gold in the hands of Black Crow?" asked Mat.

"Yes."

"And don't actually know that it came from the place where we were bound before we got twisted up in the slews?"

"That's it."

Mat Morgan consulted with the men for a moment, and then said:

"Very good. We'll make the change. We've seen the gold from these new diggings and if they are the nearest we might just as well try our luck there as to hunt for the other place."

It was so settled and within half an hour the start was made with Grey Wolf in the lead.

The old Indian was in his glory now.

Ned, with a view to making him feel all possible interest in the company's success, presented him with a rifle, a knife, a shirt and a pair of new moccasins which he had bought in Circle City.

Grey Wolf was very grateful.

He did not say much, but Young Klondike knew enough of the Indian character to make him feel certain that the old buck would stand by him through thick and thin.

All that day—that is as long as daylight lasted—they kept on through the tundra.

The hills drew nearer and nearer. It was evident that this immense swamp could not extend further than their foot.

At five o'clock in the afternoon they left the tundra and ran out into a stretch of meadow land which extended to the hills, now not more than a mile away.

Here a troublesome obstacle was encountered.

In order to reach the hills it would be necessary to follow the windings of a shallow creek which ran down into the slews.

This creek Grey Wolf declared to be the one from which he had worked the gold, but although it would float the canoes all right, it was entirely too shallow for the raft.

"We shall have to leave it behind us," said Ned, after trying the depth with his pole. "If we run ahead any further we shall ground her and then there may be difficulty in getting her off."

There was no help for it. The raft must be left behind, and as the canoes were loaded all they would

bear as it was, there was no chance of unloading the supplies.

Nothing had been seen of the enemy since their defeat at the island and Ned failed to see where they ran any risk by leaving the raft just as it was.

Still to make sure he selected three men as a guard and the raft was tied up at the edge of the tundra and left in their charge for the night, while the canoes pushed on to the base of the Ketchumstock hills.

Nothing was taken along but the tents; these were needed for shelter, of course.

Before leaving the raft supper was served and the provisions were all left behind.

"Here at last!" exclaimed Young Klondike, as they made their landing at the foot of great rocky bluffs over which the creek came tumbling into a shallow basin; "now, then, Grey Wolf, where was it that you found the gold?"

Grey Wolf pointed to the basin and declared that he had washed it out there. It certainly seemed a likely spot enough; none could be more so. When Young Klondike lay down to rest in his tent that night he felt sure that he had made no mistake.

The same cold, raw atmosphere lasted through the night. At six o'clock when Ned awoke, it seemed more like snow than ever, but still the storm held off.

Ned woke up Dick, and they hurried down to the basin, where they were presently joined by Grey Wolf, who had been on the watch.

No one else was stirring except the two men who had been doing guard duty the latter part of the night.

"Well, boys, any alarm?" asked Ned.

"No, sir," replied one of the guard. "There hasn't been a sign of anyone all night; we might as well have been asleep."

"Not at all," replied Ned. "Eternal vigilance is the price of safety, you know. There's nothing like being on the safe side and keeping a watch."

"I don't believe they'll bother us any more though. All the same," declared Dick, "we have shown that we were too many for them. Now, then, Ned, let's get to work."

The idea was to do a little panning before breakfast.

Ned put on his long rubber boots, and taking a big scoop shovel waded out into the basin.

The water was but a little above his knees; it was hard to see the bottom in the dark, but from the way it felt under his feet it seemed like fine sand.

Dick had the pans ready and Ned dug his scoop shovel down and filled three of them with the sand which proved to carry very little gravel with it.

Grey Wolf held the lantern and declared that he could see gold in the pan already, which was certainly more than either Ned or Dick could do.

But as soon as they began to wash out the sand the lantern's light showed them the tiny yellow particles, with an occasional nugget.

"Hello! what are you fellows about?" cried the Unknown, coming out of the tent a little later.

"Hooray!" shouted Young Klondike. "Come along, Zed! We're right in it again! We've made a big strike!"

CHAPTER VIII.

SNOWED IN.

"BULLY for our side! Ye gods and little fishes! I knew we'd hit it!" shouted the Unknown. "Hooray for the first strike!"

Then the Unknown threw up the rusty old plug hat which he always persisted in wearing, and catching it on his head, thrust his hands in his pockets, and gave the boys a little walk around there at the edge of the basin, which was his way of showing his enthusiasm over the lucky find.

And who would not be enthusiastic under the circumstances?

Even by these primitive methods, panning there in the dark, the boys had taken out over a hundred dollars in those three pans.

The sand was so fine that the gold, which proved to be nearly all in the form of nuggets, had settled to the bottom of the pan at the first shaking.

Three times three pans were washed out before they gave it up and every time there were the same wonderful results.

The news spread among the tents and soon all hands were up and out.

Company K went fairly wild in its enthusiasm, and there was no one better pleased than Grey Wolf, who kept saying:

"Me tell you true, boss! Ugh! Ugh! Me tell you true! Plenty gold! Plenty gold!"

And certainly no one could ask for a better showing than Young Klondike's Company K found there at the foot of the Ketchumstock hills.

But their enthusiasm was soon to have a serious damper thrown upon it.

A blow had been dealt by the enemy, which was to throw the little camp into the deepest gloom.

As soon as it was daylight Ned and the Unknown, with several men, went down the creek with all the canoes to bring up the goods.

As they drew near the tundra a silence suddenly came over all, notwithstanding that they had been laughing and joking only a few moments before.

"It isn't there, dear boy!" broke out the Unknown, at last.

"I'm afraid it isn't," replied Ned. "Mat, can you see the raft?"

"No," said Mat Morgan. "No, I can't, boss. I reckon you may as well prepare for the worst. The raft isn't in sight."

"Bad job! By the Jumping Jeremiah, a mighty bad job!" exclaimed the Unknown. "Enemy in, raft out and our three men prisoners, or worse."

"I hope to Heaven it isn't worse," muttered Ned,

hardly daring to give utterance to the terrible suspicion that had come over him.

But it was worse. When they reached the place where the raft had been tied up, there lay the three men stretched out upon the grass dead and cold.

It was an awful blow to them all.

"Hear me, Heaven!" cried Mat Morgan, throwing up his hand, "if I ever get my chance at Rene Benoit or Martin Dill I'll flay them alive!"

Threats were useless, as were revengeful feelings.

Rene Benoit's gang was made up of some of the worst ruffians in the Klondike country, and in case they got their chance nothing less than this was to be expected of them.

The three men had been shot. One in the heart, one through the neck and the third in the forehead.

"Poor fellows! No back shots here," murmured Ned. "They were facing the enemy and defending our property. It was all they could do."

What time the fight had taken place it was of course quite impossible to say, but as the bodies were entirely cold it must certainly have been far back in the night.

By Young Klondike's direction the remains of the unfortunate guard were tenderly lifted into the canoes, and a start back for camp made.

"The boys will be heartbroken when they hear of this," remarked the Unknown, as they paddled upstream.

"Their death must be avenged!" declared Young Klondike. "Not by any offhand shooting, but by the strong arm of the law. If it costs me the last dollar I am worth I shall run those scoundrels down and bring them to justice."

"No, you won't," said the Unknown. "That's my job."

"What do you mean?"

"Exactly what I say. As soon as we have buried our poor friends I am going to start off on a still hunt for these men, and don't you forget it I shall find them; you'll see."

"I should say so, but we need to do it; in fact, we've got to do it," answered Ned. "Do you realize that we have no provisions except the few trifles that the men brought up to camp in their canoes?"

"Do I? Don't I! I realize it only too well. Say what you like, Young Klondike; object to my running the risk all you please, but some one has got to locate that raft or Company K stands a fair chance of starving to death."

As yet Mat Morgan and his men did not seem to realize this; they were too much excited over the loss of their friends, and indeed the whole camp was thrown into the greatest excitement by the arrival of the canoes.

Gold digging was forgotten. They could talk of nothing else but the murder, and they were still talking about it when it began to snow.

"We must bury these poor fellows at once," declared Ned. "Mat, we must dig the graves while there is time."

"Yes, boss, and when that's done we are off after the raft," replied Mat. "Do you realize that there isn't a bit of grub left in the camp?"

"Well, I do! We won't be slow to act, Mat; but the storm is coming and we must not run any risks. The Unknown proposed to start off after the canoe, but I think he had better wait and go with us."

"Hello!" exclaimed Dick, coming up at that moment and overhearing the remark; "you're too late, Ned."

"What! Has he gone already?"

"Been gone these ten minutes, and Grey Wolf has gone with him. I wanted him to speak to you, but he said he had already done so and you approved."

"He'll take care of himself," replied Ned. "Leave the Unknown alone for that; but his going needn't hinder us. It must not! He can do no more than locate the camp of the gang, but we must capture it and get back our provisions. Think, besides the grub almost all our mining tools, the portable houses, everything that we proposed to make ourselves comfortable with, was on that raft."

While this conversation was in progress the digging of the graves was going on rapidly.

The unfortunate men were wrapped in their blankets and laid on the ground, Young Klondike reading the burial service before the frozen earth was thrown in.

By the time this was over it was snowing hard, so hard, in fact, that Ned saw to his dismay that it would be next to useless to start off in the canoes.

"What do you think of it, Dick?" he asked. "You see the boys are getting ready for a start."

"They ought not to go," replied Dick very decidedly. "It isn't safe."

"Of course it isn't," said Edith. "There is only one thing to do, and that is to wait for the storm to pass."

"Tell Mat Morgan that, and see what a row there will be," replied Ned. "I don't see how we can stop them now."

Indeed, Ned had made up his mind to go, just because he felt that he could not help himself, but before he could get down to the canoes, the matter was settled for him.

A blizzard of the worst kind struck the little camp. Suddenly it came swooping down upon them.

The wind which had been just ordinary before, increased all in a moment to a gale of the utmost fury, while the amount of snow which came with it, was greater than Ned had seen in all his experience on the Klondike.

"Good Heavens! If this is going to last we can't move out of here with the canoes, grub or no grub!" Mat Morgan exclaimed.

The blizzard had come to stay. The wind seemed to increase rather than diminish. Ned felt that it could not be blowing less than a hundred miles an hour.

The whirl of snow was blinding. It was impossible

to see a foot away, and after a few moments Young Klondike became seriously alarmed.

"We can't stay in the tents," he declared. "We shall have to seek shelter somewhere else. Mat, what are we going to do?"

"Don't ask me, boss," replied Mat Morgan. "Bad luck has struck us. It wouldn't surprise me a bit if we all lost our lives in this storm."

"Not if I know it! Boys, we've got to look out for ourselves. I don't ask you to do anything but just what seems best to you, but I say whoever is willing can follow me!"

It was almost impossible to hear these words above the howling of the wind, but Ned did not wait to find out whether they were heard or not.

Calling upon Dick and Edith to follow him, he started along the cliffs in search of a place where they could be in a measure shielded from the blast.

Company K followed gloomily enough.

Men of their kind are alike the world over. There was a good deal of grumbling.

To hear some of these prospectors talk, one would imagine that they held Young Klondike responsible for the storm.

Ned had not far to go before he discovered just what he was looking for.

This was a rift in the rocks, a deep indentation among the cliffs with an overhanging ledge on the windward side, which was amply big enough to protect all hands from the storm.

"It's better than remaining in the tents, boys," declared Ned. "Hustle round now, and cut down some of those hemlock trees up the rift. Build a roaring fire and make yourselves as comfortable as you can."

"Shall we bring the tents up here?" asked Edith.

"I think we had better. There is certainly no sense in leaving them there on the bank of the creek to be buried in the snow."

Ned lent his aid to the wood choppers, while Dick, Edith and several others went after the tents.

The storm was so fierce that it was all they could do to get back again.

It almost seemed as if the wind must blow them away.

But perseverance at last brought them shelter, rude though it was.

The hemlock huts were built and a few tents put in place.

Almost everybody seemed to prefer the shelters, but Ned and Dick stuck to the tent. Not from choice, indeed, but because there was no chance to build shelters for all hands, and it was part of Young Klondike's religion to see his men taken care of before thinking of himself.

Fiercer and fiercer blew the wind. Harder and harder the snow came whirling about them.

By common consent no mention was made of the Unknown.

That his friends in camp felt seriously worried about the little detective, need scarcely be said.

After an hour the situation grew still more serious. There was no sign of the storm abating; mountains of snow rose all around them now.

To have gone back to the basin would have risked one's life.

The day wore on. Deeper and deeper grew the drifts. No sign of the wind going down. No change in the quantity of falling snow.

Under that ledge Young Klondike's party found themselves warm and comfortable, but they were snowed in, and what was worse there seemed no chance of getting out of their prison for days to come.

CHAPTER IX.

STARVATION.

It did not stop snowing until half past five the next morning.

How many inches fell on a level it would be hard to tell, it drifted so; but outside the rock shelter of Company K the drifts were eight and nine feet deep.

When Young Klondike got up he pulled on his big boots, and made up his mind that he would go to the creek no matter how deep the snow was, but he only succeeded in getting a few yards away from camp, before he found himself wallowing in drifts which were over his head.

"Dick! Dick!" he shouted. "Come and pull me out! Get a rope or something! Heavens! I shall smother here."

Dick and Mat Morgan went to the rescue and Ned was dragged out of the drift.

It took him some time to get his breath and then he was ready to try it again.

"Mat, we've got to work our own way to the creek," he said. "First of all we've got to see if it's frozen over and what the condition of the canoes is."

"That's what's the matter," said Mat, "but how are you going to do it, boss?"

"What one cannot do, many may. We have got to shovel out."

"It would take us till next summer. We've only got three shovels; all the rest are on that confounded raft."

"I suppose we could do it if we tried. Suppose it takes all day? It's got to be done."

Mat yielded grumblingly. He was hungry and being hungry made him cross, but his condition was no worse than that of the others.

There was absolutely nothing to eat in the camp, every scrap brought up from the raft having been consumed for breakfast the day before.

It was now twenty-four hours since any member of Young Klondike's Company K had tasted food.

Ned did his best to cheer them, and Edith went from man to man beseeching them to stand up bravely against this great trial.

All admired the beautiful girl greatly and her influence went a long way with them.

The digging began at once.

Ned, Dick and Edith insisted upon being first and they each took a shovel and went at it, working for half an hour.

By this time Mat Morgan and the men felt pretty well ashamed of the stand they had taken, and insisted upon relieving them.

The work went steadily on after that, and by noon a narrow path had been cut through the drift down to the creek.

To Ned's great joy this was not frozen over, although there was ice in the basin hindering their work there.

"I'm going down to the tundra," declared Ned. "Now, then, boys, it is better to work than to stand idle. I say let us begin our mining operations at once and keep right at it, just as though we had plenty to eat in camp."

No one made any objection, so Ned proceeded to lay out a plan.

He ordered a place cleared alongside the basin for a shaft, and a great frost fire built.

If gold was found in the basin, he argued that it ought also to be found alongside of it, for the land along under the cliffs was really a part of the basin, the creek being but the remains of some old mountain torrent, which had washed down the soil in former times.

To this the men yielded readily enough, and work began at once.

Ned then took the largest canoe, and with Dick and Edith started to paddle down the creek in the almost vain hope of seeing something of Grey Wolf and the Unknown.

It was a very solemn party.

Thoughts of the Unknown's fate oppressed them terribly.

"I don't see how he possibly could have escaped," remarked Edith, at last. "It breaks my heart to say it, but I'm very much afraid we shall never see poor Zed again."

"Don't say it and don't think it," said Ned. "If it was anybody else but the Unknown I should be ready enough to agree with you, but you know how many times we have given him up for lost. Did he ever fail to turn up? Oh, no!"

"But where could he possibly have found shelter?" mused Dick. "To be exposed to that storm on the tundra would be sure death."

"That's true enough," said Ned, "and if Rene Benoit's gang were out on that tundra in the storm not one of them can be alive at the present time, but for all that, I still have hopes for the Unknown."

But Ned was inclined to change his opinion after an hour or so.

They explored as far into the tundra as they dared, but could not see a living soul.

The moss was covered with snow in some places where it had found a chance to lodge; at other points

the wind had swept over great sections and blown the snow away.

At no point did they find the slews frozen. In fact, it was not very cold, and at midday everything was thawing, although it began to freeze again in the afternoon.

By half past one Young Klondike sorrowfully announced that they would have to return.

"If we could only shoot something," sighed Dick. "It would be a relief to be able to take a little food back to Company K."

"Slim chance," replied Edith. "You'll see no more ducks this season, and what else is there? You know how scarce game is here at all times."

"There is likely to be serious trouble if we don't get food soon," said Ned, gloomily.

Edith shuddered.

She had been long enough in the Klondike country now to know to what Ned referred. Awful stories of parties of starving prospectors devouring each other had reached their ears the previous winter.

Even to think of such things in connection with Company K, made Edith sick at heart.

But there was a streak of luck in store for them. Just as they came in sight of the beginning of the meadows—they were paddling up the main slew at the time—Edith suddenly gave an exclamation and threw up her rifle.

Ned and Dick stopped paddling and held their breath, for there was a large buck moose drinking at the creek.

The wind was blowing toward them, otherwise the animal in all probability would never have been seen at all, so keen is the scent of the moose.

As it was, his back being turned, he did not seem to be aware of their presence which gave Edith just the chance she wanted, but her hand trembled, so great was her eagerness, and for the moment Ned feared that she was going to make a miss of it.

But no! When the rifle spoke the moose gave one leap into the air and started into the creek.

Before it could reach the opposite bank the poor brute stumbled, raised itself once, and then fell dead in the water, shot through the heart by Edith's superb aiming.

"Good enough!" cried Ned. "Now we are all right! Hooray!"

It was a relief certainly, but what was one moose among so many?"

At the most it would support Company K only for a week.

But Young Klondike did not stop to think of that then. He was too rejoiced at even this temporary relief.

They soon had the moose in tow behind the canoe, and in this way paddled back to camp where they were received with great enthusiasm by Company K.

Mat Morgan had nothing to report except that progress had been made in the work.

The ground had been cleared alongside the basin

and three big fires were burning over ground where it was intended to start prospect holes.

It had taken all the morning to clear away the snow and bring down wood from the hillside, where there was a great plenty.

Besides this, Mat had kept four men at work panning the sands from the basin, the ice having been broken for that purpose.

The reports from the panners was most satisfactory.

Over three hundred dollars was the result of this work, and Ned knew that the men were by no means expert panners, and that the chances were the biggest part of the gold had been allowed to escape.

The capture of the moose put everybody in good humor, and the animal was promptly skinned and cut up, and in a surprisingly short time a hindquarter was roasting over the fire.

"You dole out the meat, Mat," said Young Klondike. "Let every man have his share, and not an ounce more. As for me and my party, we come in with the rest."

That night all hands returned to the shelters under the rocks, and being warmed and fed, a comparatively comfortable night might have been looked for if it was not for the uneasiness Ned, Dick and Edith felt about the Unknown.

As for Ned, he could not sleep. Every time he closed his eyes it seemed to him that he could hear the detective calling, but for Dick's sake he lay quiet until along toward midnight, when he felt that he could endure it no longer.

Quietly unrolling himself from the blanket Ned got up and was about stealing out of the tent, when Dick called to him to know what the matter was.

"I can't sleep. It's no use, Dick."

"Same here. I've never closed my eyes all night."

"Impossible; you must be mistaken; you have never moved nor made a sound."

"Oh, that's because I didn't want to disturb you; I might say the same thing; you never moved nor made a sound until now."

"And for the same reason. Dick, let's go down to the fires; I'm too nervous to sleep."

Dick needed no second invitation, and a few moments later the boys with lantern and rifles were walking single file between the huge snowdrifts.

Everything was quiet at the creek. No guard had been placed there as none seemed necessary. The boys stirred up the glowing coals and piled on fresh wood and then walked down to the bank of the creek to see if the canoes were all right.

I suppose that fire ought to be seen for miles over the tundra," said Dick. "If the Unknown still lives it ought to be an easy matter for him to find his way back here."

"Hark!" exclaimed Ned, suddenly. "What was that?"

"What?"

"It seemed to me as if I could hear him calling."

"Well, now, that's queer," said Dick. "Do you

know I fancied the same thing myself a dozen times while I lay there."

"So did I."

"Isn't that odd? It only goes to show what imagination will do."

They turned to go back to the fires when it seemed to Ned that he could hear the cry again.

"Is it possible that you don't hear it, Dick?" he asked.

"Can't say I do," replied Dick, "and my ears are pretty sharp, too. It must be imagination, Ned."

"No, it isn't imagination, either. Nothing of the sort. I tell you I did hear—there it goes again."

"By gracious, I heard it that time!" cried Dick. "It's the Unknown!"

Ned was thrown into the greatest excitement. Without fully believing that Dick could be sure of the Unknown's voice, he was perfectly willing to believe that it was the detective, or at least to act just as though he did believe it.

"It's a mercy we came down here as we did!" he exclaimed. "Quick! Don't let us lose an instant; we'll run down the creek and try to find out what this means."

Hastily boarding the canoe, they paddled away down the stream, hope increasing as they advanced.

Again and again the cry was heard, and each time Dick answered it he would assert that it was the Unknown's voice.

"He's stranded somewhere—but he hears us," he declared. "Just a few minutes and we'll know all about it. I don't care what happens if we can only bring old Zed safe up to the camp."

So they paddled on, and soon there came a time when they could distinguish words.

"Hello, Ned! Hello, Dick! Is it you?"

"Hooray!" shouted Ned. "Give him the answer, Dick! Your voice can reach further than mine. It's the Unknown as sure as fate!"

"We are coming!" yelled Dick. "It's all right, Zed. Where are you, old man?"

"By the Jumping Jeremiah, I'm in the soup! I mean the snow!" was the answer shouted back.

And in the snow they found him, sure enough.

Down at the edge of the tundra with snow up to his waist, and his tall hat pulled down over his ears, and his hands in his pockets, stood the Unknown the very picture of despair.

"Well, well, well! I thought I was a goner this time!" he exclaimed, as the boys approached. "I was fully prepared to freeze to death here before morning. Ye gods and little fishes, it was a lucky thought which popped into your heads to keep awake and listen for the old Unknown this blessed night!"

Of course the first thing was to take the Unknown into the canoe, and the next to pull for the fires as quick as possible, and no question was asked until they were well under way.

"Where's Grey Wolf?" inquired Ned, as soon as he had made the detective as comfortable as circumstances would permit.

"Dead, I'm afraid," was the reply. "Oh, boys, I've got a lot to tell!"

"Take your time, Zed, take your time," said Young Klondike. "Don't tell it now unless you choose."

"Oh, I might as well talk now as any other time. You found me stuck in the mud—I mean the snow—and first of all I must tell you that I managed to bust a hole in the bottom of the canoe by running onto a sharp lump of ice, and just as I got to the point where you found me the blame thing sunk. Ye gods and little fishes! I just had time to jump ashore and save myself; otherwise I would have gone down into the creek with it. Not that it would have drowned me, but I should have frozen my nose—I mean my toes."

"That's a bad job," said Ned. "But say, you're putting the cart before the horse, and beginning at the wrong end of the story. We want to hear it all."

But after all the Unknown had not so much to tell. In company with Grey Wolf he had worked down into the tundra without seeing anything of the raft. Finding that the storm was about to come they started back, but were too late to escape it.

Then finding it impossible to make the camp of Company K, they started for an old Indian camp up another slew right under the hills, a place which Grey Wolf knew about, it having been abandoned by his tribe two years before.

Here the Unknown passed the night of the storm in comparative comfort, but when morning dawned he discovered that Grey Wolf was missing.

What had become of the old Indian he did not know, as the canoe remained undisturbed.

After waiting for his return nearly all day, the Unknown came to the conclusion that he must have wandered away from the old lodge and perished in the storm, so he took the canoe and started back alone, losing his way in the slews as a matter of course.

Night overtook him before he could find it again, and then followed the accident to the canoe.

This was the Unknown's story, but if it had been anything else the boys would have been just as well satisfied, they were so rejoiced to have him back again safe and sound.

There was great rejoicing in camp too, when Company K found that the lost was found.

For the next few days everything went on with comparative smoothness. Work continued on the prospect holes, but the ground was very hard and frost fires had to be kept continually going.

Nothing was heard of Grey Wolf and more than all, although Edith and the boys were almost constantly out searching for game, none was found.

By the end of the week the last scrap of moose meat was consumed and starvation stared Young Klondike's Company K in the face.

Two days more and it was with them.

Still another two days and the situation grew still

worse, for it had snowed again and all chance of obtaining game had vanished.

It was now forty-eight hours since anyone in the little company had tasted food.

CHAPTER X.

GOLD, GOLD EVERYWHERE BUT NOT A BITE TO EAT.

"SWEAR that you will be true to me, boys, no matter what comes!" cried Young Klondike. "Swear that even starvation shall not make you go back on us!"

The men, without exception, threw up their hands.

"By the Jumping Jeremiah, I'll clap the bracelets on the first kicker who shows himself!" cried the Unknown, putting up both hands.

Young Klondike's Company K stood at the edge of the strip of wood just beyond the camp, forming a semicircle around their leader.

It was the morning of the third day of starvation.

Hard times had struck the little company, and yet there was every prospect that if they could only hold out to the end the diggings by the creek would make them all rich men.

It was a big strike made the night before which had decided Young Klondike to have this talk with Company K.

Just before starting in on the morning's work he called them together, and in a neat little speech stated the situation and spoke encouraging words.

"We must never give up till the last gasp, boys," he added. "There must be no kickers; as for the rest, let no man mention food, but each one work straight on, and try to do his part just as though his stomach was full."

"I only want to say one word, boss," replied Mat Morgan. "It seems to me that if instead of going down to the tundra and keeping along through the meadow land at the base of the hills, you would go up into the hills themselves, that you might have better luck. It is early in the season yet, and I can hardly believe that all the bears have gone into winter quarters. Suppose you take a trip up into the hills."

"No objection in the world, Mat, and we'll do it tomorrow," replied Ned. "To-day I wish to look after the work a little, but suppose you take four or five men and go yourself?"

Now this just suited Mat Morgan, being, in fact, what he wanted when he made the request.

Young Klondike waited only to see them started and then went down to the prospect shafts.

A nest of nuggets had been struck in one of these the night before, but it was so dark when the strike was made, that it was not an easy matter to tell what it amounted to.

This shaft was now twenty feet deep, which meant pretty good work considering that they only had three spades and three pickaxes to work with.

But there were so many men engaged that the work had been kept up pretty well night and day, which accounted for the progress made.

The next shaft was down sixteen feet, but the third had not passed through the frost yet, and work on it had now been abandoned for several days.

Fortunately for his plans Young Klondike had brought all ropes along from the raft as well as their buckets, fearing that some wandering Indian might steal them in spite of the guard.

Without these work would scarcely have been possible, but as it was they served a good turn.

A primitive sort of windlass had been rigged up over No. 1, and a similar arrangement was now being put in place at No. 2, Young Klondike, having found that it worked well at the first shaft.

As for the panning of the lake sands, that had gone on steadily and with very good success.

Something over twelve thousand dollars had been washed out of these sands.

Of this gold Young Klondike would not take one grain; every ounce was divided among the members of Company K.

"Well, Dick, how goes the battle?" asked Ned, coming upon his partner at the mouth of shaft No. 1.

"I was just going down to see," replied Dick. "There's a leak in this shaft; water has been running in from the basin all night; it froze in the bottom and we had to break the ice and bail it out."

"Is it all out now?"

"Well, about out. There may be a little left. I was just thinking about going down."

"Let's go down together. If it turns out as rich as Mat reported it last night, you and I will take right hold of No. 2 and see if we can't get it down to the twenty foot level to-day."

"How's the water?" called Dick, looking down into the shaft.

"All right, boss," replied a young fellow named Archer, who was doing the bailing.

"Very good. We are coming down."

It was all cheerful. Dick's tone could not have been more so and yet he was so ravenously hungry that it seemed as if he would go mad.

But not a word was said about this by any man on the work. Young Klondike had earnestly entreated them not to mention hunger, and during that dreadful day when many were so weak that they could scarcely stand all worked away steadily and no one broke the rule.

"Where's the Unknown and Edith?" asked Ned, as the tub came rattling up out of the shaft.

"Gone down the creek as usual," replied Dick. "Edith still hopes to bag another moose."

"May she succeed!"

"Same here; still I doubt if she will, the snow is so very deep."

"And yet do you know I can't believe that winter has fairly set in yet. It is surprisingly warm to-day. If we could only get one of our good old-fashioned

Alaska rains I believe we should tread on bare ground again before spring."

Just then the man who worked the windlass called out that the tub was ready, and Ned got in and was lowered to the bottom of the shaft, Dick following him down.

He found Ned poking over the gravel and shaking it around in the shovel.

"You see!" cried Young Klondike. "Could anything be richer than this? We've struck a good property here, Dick. There's going to be mines enough for every member of Company K, and one for each of us in the bargain or I greatly miss my mark."

"It ought to pay big as it shows up now, boss," remarked Archer, picking a few nuggets out of the sand.

"That's what it will do, Archer," replied Ned, "and it won't be such a bad place to work in once we get things in shape. It is only about two days run to Circle City. Have patience. You'll see a prosperous camp here yet."

"I'm sure I hope so, boss. We've suffered enough to deserve it."

"Cheer up! Something tells me that our sufferings are about over. Now strike in at the side here toward shaft No. 2. I want to see how it shows up there."

Archer took the pick and dug away for a few moments, loosening up a lot of gravel.

Ned shook it about in the shovel, but this was scarcely necessary, for anyone could see the nuggets in the gravel without going to this trouble.

The further in Archer went the richer it seemed to get.

For about half an hour Ned and Dick continued their examination.

"This settles it!" exclaimed Young Klondike. "You needn't go any further for our benefit, Archer. This shaft is a rich one and that's all there is about it. I'll put the men right on it. Go ahead and get out all you can before dark."

Then Ned and Dick went down into No. 2.

They took no one with them there, as it was Ned's desire to make at least one strike himself.

They had only one pick and one shovel, and a man at the windlass to receive the loaded tub as it came up.

But the boys were well used to working under disadvantages, and for two hours and more they dug away without seeing a trace of gold.

As No. 2 was on ground a trifle lower than No. 1, the eighteen-foot level there was fully equal to the twenty-foot level in the other shaft.

"About time we struck it if we are going to, Dick," Ned remarked, leaning on his pick. "By gracious, my back is tired! If it wasn't for setting a bad example to the boys I'd quit."

"We've put it down two feet, and I'd like to do another before we knock off; still, if you feel weak——"

"Don't mention it! I wouldn't own to it if I did."

"But you do all the same, and if I were you I'd give up, Ned."

"This is the way I give up," laughed Ned, seizing his pick and going at it again.

Then one of those strange coincidences happened, which sometimes come to discouraged prospectors, and add to the fascination of mining life.

At the very first stroke of the pick, Ned unearthed a big nugget weighing twenty pounds.

His shout brought all Company K to the mouth of the shaft.

"What have you struck, boss, what have you struck?" a dozen voices called out.

"Take it and see!" answered Ned, tumbling the nugget into the tub.

The sight almost made the men forget their hunger, so great was the enthusiasm aroused.

"No question about the richness of these diggings, boys!" called Young Klondike. "Go back to your work and leave this to Mr. Luckey and me. We'll show you something worth seeing before long."

And indeed it proved so.

The next thing Young Klondike did was to turn up a nest of small nuggets. The deposit began within a few inches of where the big nugget was found, and continued until dusk warned Ned that it was time to quit unless he meant to work by lantern light, which was something he did not care to do.

Over three thousand dollars was taken out of No. 2 that afternoon by Ned and Dick alone, and in this estimate we do not count the nuggets, the value of which was fully four thousand more.

The yield from No. 1 was nearly a thousand dollars, and the panners in the basin washed out about one hundred and fifty dollars' worth that day.

It was gold, gold, everywhere and not a bite to eat.

CHAPTER XI.

COMPANY K MOVES ON THE ENEMY.

"STRANGE Edith and the Unknown don't come in," remarked Ned, as he washed up in the creek after their hard day's work.

"Probably you'll see them in a few moments," replied Dick. "What worries me is Mat Morgan's party. If they should happen to get lost in the hills it would be a bad job."

"Trust Mat not to do that. He's an old hand at the bellows."

"The oldest hands get nipped sometimes. It's getting pretty dark. They'll break their necks coming down over the rocks and snow if they don't try it soon."

At that very moment a shout heard down the creek told them that Edith and the Unknown were in sight of the camp.

Ned ran up on a snowbank, which was frozen so

hard that it would easily bear him, and looked down the creek.

"Hello! what's this?" he cried. "There are three of them in a canoe, and— Hello! Hello! Hello! Hooray for Edith! She's done it again!"

The shout brought half of Company K up on the snowdrift, and the result of the increased weight was just what might have been expected. The crust gave way, and down went Young Klondike and his noble company in snow up to their necks.

But all took the accident with the greatest good nature, for before it came they had seen the welcome sight.

A large moose was in tow of the canoe.

Oh, what a cheering there was then. The air fairly rang with their shouts, and some of the company in their enthusiasm fired their rifles again and again.

Answering shots came from the canoe, and then just as the last echo died away, a ringing shot was heard up among the Ketchumstock hills.

"Mat is coming! Mat is coming!" the men shouted. "Has he struck luck too?"

Soon the canoe came around in sight and brought with it another surprise.

There in the stern paddling away was an old white haired Indian.

It was Grey Wolf!

Ned could hardly restrain himself in his impatience till they came up to the shore.

"Oh, we've got him! We've got him!" cried the Unknown. "Would you believe it, Ned, we found him stuck in the very self same drift where you found me."

"Ugh! Ugh! Me no dead, boss!" grunted Grey Wolf. "Heap snow! Hard walking now! Ugh! Ugh! Me come twenty mile since morning, but me come—me find raft."

Here was great news!

All Company K flocked around the old Indian.

This confused him and instead of telling his story he turned to the Unknown and said:

"Heap too much talk! Grey Wolf's tongue tired. Tell."

"What he wants to say is, that he has located the raft up at the head of a slew about twenty miles from here," explained the Unknown. "Rene Benoit's gang are in camp there and they have started a prospect hole, and they have struck it rich, too."

"And has Grey Wolf been working on this raft business ever since?" inquired Ned.

"That's what seems to be the case," said the Unknown. "As near as I can make out he never had the least intention of deserting me. He just got so far away from the old lodge that night that he could not get back again; according to what he tells me he must have come back within a very short time after I left."

Ned turned to the old Indian and thanked him heartily for what he had done.

"I shall not forget this, Grey Wolf," he said. "You stick to me and when we get back to Dawson

City—and remember you are going with me—I'll let you know how much I think of what you have done."

Grey Wolf seemed immensely pleased and made a little speech, in which he told how he meant to stick to Young Klondike through thick and thin, and, what was more to the point, how he would guide Company K to the camp of Rene Benoit.

Then Edith told how she had shot the moose at the same place where she had killed the previous one, and so busy was everybody with all this talk that they forgot all about the shots heard among the hills, till all at once Mat Morgan and his men came into camp dragging after them a huge bear.

Then there was more rejoicing.

Starvation days were over, and now that the tide had actually turned more good luck followed, for that night it began to rain.

Now when it rains in Alaska it is pretty apt to rain hard, and on this occasion it started in to do the business after the most approved fashion.

It rained all night and all the next day, and all the next night into the bargain, and when daylight came again after that there was mighty little left of the snow.

During this long storm, there was a feast of bear and moose meat in the camp of Company K.

The men were now in high spirits. The good strike in No. 2 had convinced even the most skeptical that Young Klondike had made no mistake in leading Company K into this unknown land.

"It will be a big thing for us in the spring, boys," Mat Morgan said to them. "You know what the boss is; he won't stay here. You'll see him going off on some other expedition sure, and each of us will have our claim, and there'll be a big lot of men run in here to work the boss' mine, and we can open stores and build a town, and all get rich in two shakes of a ram's tail."

While wealth probably would not come to Company K quite as rapidly as Mat Morgan expressed it in his quaint way, the future certainly did look very bright.

During those rainy days, Ned, Dick, Edith and the Unknown held several of their old time "councils of war," and it was decided to move on the enemy just as soon as the storm cleared up.

So one morning a few days later Young Klondike put himself at the head of his little company and started down the creek in the canoes.

Six men were left behind to guard the gold and look after the camp.

In the first canoe were Grey Wolf and the Unknown; in the second was Ned, Dick and Edith.

The third carried Mat Morgan and two of the best men in Company K and the others followed on filled with as determined a lot of fellows as one could find in the whole Klondike country.

"We want the raft, boys; we want our goods and we mean to have them," declared Ned, when the start was made.

This was the watchword of the expedition, so to speak.

Young Klondike had no thought of revenge; it wasn't in him. All he cared for was to get back his own, and after that Rene Benoit's gang could go where it liked or do what it pleased, so long as it kept out of the way of Company K.

The rain had worked wonders; the slews were all open, and not a particle of snow remained in the tundra, and very little anywhere else.

The weather was singularly mild for the time of year, and there was every prospect of a pleasant week, and perhaps two. Certainly there would be no change for a few days.

Provisions were getting scarce again, but enough of the bear and moose meat had been brought along to last the party for three full days, by which time they hoped to have recovered their own ample supply of provisions, which would put Company K beyond the possibility of want.

Before they had been half an hour in the slews a flock of ducks rose, and between Edith and Ned seven of them were bagged.

Then a little later they ran into an immense flock—hundreds rising from the tundra.

All hands were ready for them this time, and over twenty-five were shot and brought into the canoes, and Ned estimated that as many more were lost in the tundra, falling in inaccessible places which could not be reached without greatly delaying the expedition.

All the morning they paddled on through the slews turning here and twisting there, following the lead of Grey Wolf.

It was tundra, tundra everywhere, but they kept along the face of the Ketchumstock hills, which could always be seen on their right.

"Good gracious, Ned!" remarked Edith, "would we ever get back without Grey Wolf to guide us? What if he should be a traitor after all?"

"Don't mention it," replied Ned. "I confess I have had my doubts."

"He might be leading us into some Indian ambush," said Dick; "it would be a bad job if he was."

"I won't believe it," replied Ned. "No, I won't. You rub an Indian the right way and he'll be true to you every time. Now, we've done the right thing by Grey Wolf and it will take a good deal to make me believe that he won't do the right thing by us."

But Ned's confidence was not shared by Company K.

Some of the men grew very nervous, and as the day wore on and no halt was called, several of the canoes were paddled up alongside Young Klondike's, and there was a lot of talk to listen to about the possible treachery of their Indian guide.

But Ned would not pay the least attention to all this talk, nor would he run the chance of offending Grey Wolf by calling him to account.

Through it all the old Indian and the Unknown kept on ahead, turning and twisting among the slews

with Company K straggling after them, and this was the way matters stood when just at dusk they suddenly came out upon a large island in the midst of the tundra, with the hills lying about a mile away on their right.

Here Grey Wolf paddled ashore, and the Unknown called out that they were to go no further.

"Where's the enemy?" demanded Ned, after they had landed. "Now, then, Grey Wolf, we have followed you here without question. How much further is it to the enemy's camp?"

Grey Wolf pointed to the hills.

"There!" he said. "Right there! See, boss! See smoke!"

"Sure enough!" exclaimed Dick. "There is a light smoke rising among the rocks over there."

"That's what there is," added the Unknown. "Oh, you needn't be afraid to trust Grey Wolf, dear boy. He's as straight as a string. I expect the boys have been nervous all day, but you must remember it takes time to follow the slews. We never could have found this place alone."

"What's to be done now, Grey Wolf?" asked Dick. "How do we get up to the enemy's camp?"

Grey Wolf pointed to a slew right ahead and declared that it led straight to Benoit's camp.

"Wait till dark," he added. "No use go now. Make trouble. Wait till dark night."

The advice seemed good, and it was decided that no move should be made until after midnight.

But Young Klondike's impatience would not permit him to remain idle all that time.

"We'll make a move on the enemy on our own account, Dick," he said. "We'll slip away and make a run up the slew right now."

It took some maneuvering to do this, for the Unknown declared that on no account should they go without him, and Ned was just as determined that the detective should remain with Grey Wolf, for he seemed to understand handling the Indian better than anyone else.

At last they managed it, and did actually get into the slew with the canoe without being seen.

"Now then, Dick!" exclaimed Ned, "away we go! We'll find out for ourselves just what's ahead of us."

"Do you think anyone saw us go?" asked Dick.

"I'm certain no one did," replied Ned. "Edith and the Unknown are busy with the supper, and the boys are all at work picking the ducks. I think myself it's a big risk to light a fire, but as the others are determined to eat the ducks now, I suppose it would have been of no use for me to say anything. It was one reason why I wanted to get up the slew, Dick. If the smoke attracts the attention of the enemy, we shall be the first to know that he is coming, and it will give us time to warn the camp."

The boys paddled on up the slew, and before they had gone far a bright light in the direction from which they had come, showed them that their own camp fire had been lighted.

"There you are, Dick!" exclaimed Ned. "You see yourself what a give away it is."

"It ought to have been stopped!" declared Dick. "Shall we go back?"

"No; it's too late now. Look ahead. There's Benoit's camp fire showing, too. You can see its light against the sky."

"Looks to me as though they were up a canyon."

"Well, so I understood. They are not in the open as we are at our camp. I'd like mighty well to know what kind of a strike they have made."

Young Klondike was to know all about it sooner than he thought for.

They were now almost out of the slew, and could see the higher land rising before them, when all at once a large canoe shot out of the tundra directly in their path.

Four men were in it and three flung up rifles.

"We've got you now, Young Klondike!" cried one of the men. "Don't try for your guns! Look behind you. It's surrender or it's death, one of the two!"

Ned looked back and saw two other canoes come out of the tundra behind him.

"Look out! They are going to fire!" cried Dick, and at the same instant all three rifles were discharged point blank at the canoe.

CHAPTER XII.

SAVED BY COMPANY K.

RENE BENOIT was not only a great scoundrel, but a shrewd one. When he stole Young Klondike's raft he knew perfectly well that sooner or later he would have to face the owner at the head of Company K.

As long as the snow held Benoit knew that he was safe, but the moment the great rainstorm cleared up Benoit prepared for an attack, and not only that, but he organized a special guard to keep a constant outlook over the tundra.

This guard was stationed upon the summit of a rocky spur of the Ketchumstock hills, from which place an extended view of the tundra was to be had.

Ned need not have troubled himself about the fire; the presence of Company K was known to Benoit before the landing was made on the island. Here were the canoes watching for Young Klondike's scouts, but it is safe to say that Benoit had no expectation of capturing both members of the firm of Golden & Lucky, as it looked very much as if he might now.

The instant the firing began, Ned gave himself up for lost.

"They simply mean to murder us, Dick!" he shouted. "Defend yourself, old man! We'll die fighting, anyhow."

He seized his rifle, and was just able to get in one shot when the canoe suddenly sank.

This was Benoit's scheme. His fire had been di-

rected at the canoe, and the side was riddled with bullets just below the water line.

Before they had time to realize what was happening Ned and Dick were in the slew, struggling in the icy water, with the rifles popping away all the while.

Still they were not hit, strange as it may seem.

These two boys seemed to bear charmed lives.

They swam for the tundra and tried to make a landing.

It was so dark that Ned could scarcely see a foot ahead of him, and in the confusion he lost sight of Dick.

Scrambling into the tundra he went down waist deep in the mud and could not extricate himself.

Here he would have perished miserably if he had not been discovered by the enemy, as he was a few moments later.

It was Rene Benoit himself who spied him, and poor Ned was pulled out all plastered over with mud and dragged into the canoe.

"Ha! Ha! We've got you now, Young Klondike!" chuckled Benoit. "You will have me thrown out of your meeting, will you? Very good! It's my turn next! I would killed you just now, but I know a trick worth two of that. Die you shall, but it will be in a way that will make all such as you give Rene Benoit a wide berth in the future. You will see."

"Do your worst," replied Young Klondike, stoutly. "I'm not afraid of you or any man living. Where is my friend?"

"Dead."

"Shot by your hand?"

"Couldn't tell you whether he was shot or not. We saw him sink and that is all we know about it. Oh, yes, he's dead fast enough. You will never see your partner again."

And this was said with such a show of truth that Ned could not help but believe it and his heart sank. With Dick dead it made very little difference whether he lived or not.

Young Klondike buried his face in his hands as the men paddled up the slew, and when Rene Benoit tried to keep on talking to him never answered a word.

But poor Ned need not have disturbed himself.

Dick was not dead; he was not even injured. When Rene Benoit said that he saw him sink he lied, for after the overturn of the boat he never saw him at all.

Just then Dick was lying among that horrible moss, shivering in his wet garments, and trying to collect his scattered senses, and to make up his mind what was to be done about Ned.

That he deeply regretted having ignored the advice of the Unknown and separated himself from Company K, need scarcely be said, but it was too late for regrets now. They would do no good. What was wanted was quick action, and Dick did not know how to act. He could not move an inch without running the risk of going head over ears in the mud.

Such was poor Dick's situation, and it was alto-

gether so serious that the boy might have been excused for giving up in despair.

But Dick did nothing of the sort. He was not at all that kind of a boy. Something had to be done, and Dick started right in to do it as soon as he could get his breath.

"What I want is Company K," he thought. "That's the only thing to do, to get them and to get them now."

Dick thought for about three minutes, and then deliberately got up and began to feel about with his feet for a place where he could stand firm.

It was a hard thing to find. Again and again he went knee deep into the mud, but at last he did succeed in getting a firm footing, and then in spite of the icy temperature of the water, he deliberately began to pull off his clothes.

As soon as he was stripped he dove into the slew without a moment's hesitation.

It was a terrible shock and made poor Dick's teeth chatter, we can assure you. At first he thought he could never stand it; that he would certainly have to come out again, but he persevered and in a moment it was not so bad.

What Dick was after was the canoe. He knew about where it sunk, and he felt that he could get it. Again and again he dove down and crawled about the muddy bottom of the slew. If the cramp had seized him it would have been all over with Dick in a moment, but fortunately he had no such unpleasant experience and at last, to his great joy, he did succeed in finding the canoe, and dragging it into the tundra. By the time this was accomplished Dick was almost used up. His teeth chattered and his whole body trembled. It was all he could do to get on his clothes.

But Dick stuck to it and won.

He dressed himself and plugged up the bullet holes in the canoe with moss, although each one had to be found by feeling, for it was too dark to see a thing.

A little later, Dick was in the canoe paddling back to camp for all he was worth. Luckily for him one of the paddles had lodged against the moss where Dick found it before he began diving for the canoe.

He had not gone far before he heard the sound of paddles ahead of him, and in a moment a canoe came in sight, heading up the slew.

Grey Wolf was in it; the Unknown was in it, and Edith was in it.

"By the Jumping Jeremiah, it's Dick!" cried the detective, catching sight of him. "Dick! Dick! Where's Ned?"

And what could poor Dick say? Tell them that Ned had been captured by the enemy?

He did not know that. In fact he knew no more about Ned than Ned knew about him, but in the bottom of his heart Dick feared the worst.

He believed that Young Klondike was dead.

* * * * *

But Dick was entirely mistaken. Young Klondike was very far from being dead, and fortunately for

him Rene Benoit had abandoned the idea of killing him offhand, for the fact was an idea had been suggested to the villain by Jack Adams, his right hand man who was with him in the canoe.

"Say," whispered Jack, before they had gone far, "now's your chance if you want to find out about the strike of our gold deposit. There isn't a man in Alaska who knows more about them things than Young Klondike. I'd rather take his say so than that of the most experienced mining expert in the land."

"That's a good idea," replied Benoit, "but after that I'm going turn him over to the Indians. There won't be no safety for us as long as Young Klondike's alive."

This conversation Ned did not hear. By this time the brave boy had recovered his calmness and sat there quietly, resolved to take the situation as it should be taken and to show no sign of fear.

The canoe was paddled on until they came to the mouth of a creek which ran through the higher land.

Here Young Klondike saw his raft carefully tied up to a solitary tree.

"Ha, ha!" laughed Rene Benoit, pointing to it. "There you are, you see, Young Klondike. Much obliged to you for providing such a nice line of grub for us. We've enjoyed it first-rate. Hope your Company K did the same."

Ned made no answer.

"What's the matter with you? Why don't you speak?" demanded Benoit.

"Because I've got nothing to say."

"Sulky, eh? Well, we'll soon change all that. Come on up and see my mine."

Now Rene Benoit had actually struck a good mine; in fact, the whole country was rich, and gold can be found almost anywhere along the line of the base of the Ketchumstock hills.

Rene's mine was up the canyon out of which the creek flowed. Here he had put up Young Klondike's portable house and made things very comfortable for his men. Outside of the house were several skin lodges, and a number of Coppermine Indians came crowding about the prisoner as he was brought into camp.

"We are feeding these fellows," explained Rene. "They came to us during the storm, and I don't mind telling you, Young Klondike, that we were afraid to give them the cold shoulder. They are a treacherous lot. I wished I knew how to get rid of them yesterday, but now I think different. I'm going to use them to fight your Company K, and don't you forget it we shall scalp every man of them and sink their bodies in the slews; as for Edith Welton, I intend to marry her. I've been wanting a wife this long time, and she's just the sort of gal to suit me. Oh, you needn't glare. We've got you cold. Just as soon as I get through with you here I'm going to move on Company K.

There's only one thing that can save your own life. I tell you that flat."

"You've talked enough to tell all you know," replied Ned, quietly, "but you might as well make a finish of it by telling me what that one thing is."

"Why, cert! Of course I'll do it. I've got a prospect hole here, and I want your opinion on it. The fact is I set great store by your opinion, Young Klondike. I tell you that flat."

It was a case where to gain time was everything, and Young Klondike instantly came to the conclusion that the best thing he could do was to accept the situation and fight for time.

"Now then, get back, boys, and leave this man to me and Jack," ordered Rene. "You may as well get all the canoes ready. I'm going down the slews in a few minutes. Big Antelope, come here."

"How! How!" grunted a pompous Indian, who had been staring at Ned.

Rene drew him aside, and they spoke together for a few moments.

Ned heard the Indian grunt repeatedly; he seemed pleased with what Rene was saying, but Ned wasn't—not at all.

Now the fact was Ned had unusually sharp ears. Although Rene had moved away far enough to be out of hearing, as he supposed, such was not the case, for Ned heard every word up to a certain point.

"We want him killed and you shall do it," he said to the Indian. "There are over thirty palefaces coming up the slews to clear us out. We want to give them the scare. Get one of your old canoes ready. Do up the boy and send him down ahead of us as a warning of what they may expect—"

Now this was the point where Ned ceased to hear, for Rene stepped back a little further and his words were lost.

It was interesting listening for Young Klondike, all this.

"If I can't do something desperate to help myself I'm a lost man," thought Ned.

His quick eye had taken in the whole situation of the camp before this—as much at least as could be taken in there in the dark.

A moment later and Rene Benoit was at his side again.

"Now, then, Young Klondike, I want you to come with us and give me your opinion of my mine," he said. "Jack, get the lantern. I'll watch the boy now."

Jack Adams went off for the lantern, and when he returned with it Ned was taken up the canyon to the mouth of a shaft.

It was constructed in the usual way. There was a tub and a windlass hung over it. Rene told Ned to get into the tub and go down.

"You go first, Rene," said Adams. "We better keep the boy in sight between us, don't you know."

"What nonsense! Can he escape down there in the bottom of the shaft?"

"It don't make no odds. I say one of us should be down there to receive him. I'll go if you say so."

"Oh, I'll go; you understand working the tub better than I do," growled Rene, and getting into the tub he was lowered down.

The instant his head passed below the line of the top of the shaft, Jack Adams whispered to Ned in a voice almost inaudible:

"Feel in my pocket and get a revolver, young feller; the outside coat pocket next to you—that's it! Now, then, you know what to do with it, I suppose, only don't kill him. Leave him there in the bottom of the shaft, tied up, so that he can't squeak. You'll find cord in the other pocket. He's a big coward, and if you only work the bluff boldly you can do it alone."

Ned could scarcely believe his ears.

"Thank you!" he breathed. "I shan't forget this."

"Hello, up there! What in thunder's the matter? Why don't you send the boy down the shaft?" shouted Rene from below.

"He's a-coming!" called Jack, and Ned, stepping into the tub, was lowered down.

"Now, then, Young Klondike," said Rene, swinging the lantern about, "I made a good strike in this shaft, but I seem to have worked through it. You can see the gold on the sides there, and down here at the bottom it's all black sand. What do I want to do, keep on a-digging and strike it again or shall I drift where I've got gold?"

"I can't see that you've got any gold," replied Ned, "but I suppose the trouble is my sight isn't sharp enough; suppose you scrape out a sample; I can judge better when I see what kind of dirt it is."

"That's easy done," replied Rene, and pulling out his big knife, he turned his back on Ned and began scraping at the pay dirt in the side of the shaft.

Instantly Ned drew his revolver and covered his man.

"That will do, Rene Benoit. Drop that knife!"

"Gee whiz! where did you get that gun?" gasped Rene. "Treachery! This is Jack Adams' work."

But the knife went down just the same, and the hands were extended when Ned ordered it.

"Speak one word—make one sound and you are a dead man!" said Ned, sternly. "Now, then, I'm going to tie your hands, Rene Benoit, and I'm going to gag you, and if you try to resist by the least movement you know what the result will be."

And Ned did tie his hands, and gagged him, too, and then quietly stepping into the tub, was hoisted out of the shaft by Jack Adams.

"You want to take me with you, Young Klondike," said the man. "I've done this because I know you've always been a good friend to the poor miner, but I'm as good as dead if I stay here."

"You're my friend for life," replied Ned, "but how can we go?"

"Come with me and don't open your mouth," replied Adams, and he led him straight to the canoes at the creek.

"Ugh! Ugh! Me scalp boy now?" demanded Big Antelope, coming up.

"Not now; wait," said Adams. "Boy, get into the canoe there. Quick!"

"Where's Rene?" asked one of the men. "Aren't we going to make a move?"

"He'll be here in a minute," replied Adams; "my orders are to take Young Klondike down to the slews and wait for him there."

"No!" grunted Big Antelope. "No, me take boy."

He laid a heavy hand on Ned's shoulder.

Instantly Ned drew off and dealt the Indian a stunning blow between the eyes which sent him sprawling back upon the ground.

"Gee! Now, you've done it!" cried Adams. "Into the canoe for your life!"

Ned sprang into the canoe and Adams followed, but the mischief was done.

Instantly a great hullabaloo arose and the men, Indians and whites, came for them on the rush.

What the result might have been under other circumstances it is hard to say, but at the same instant some twenty men suddenly rose up from among the high grass which lined the creek on either side.

"Shoot down every man unless all instantly surrender!" was shouted by a little man with a tall hat tilted back on his head; "by the Jumping Jeremiah, I'm here to put the handcuffs on you all!"

It was the Unknown! It was Dick! It was Edith! It was Young Klondike's Company K!

They had come up the slew in the darkness, and landing at the mouth of the creek, crawled up through the high grass, coming upon the enemy unobserved.

This was Dick's doings, and never did a scheme work out better. Outnumbered and outgeneraled, the outlaws immediately surrendered, while Big Antelope and his Indians took to their heels.

Rene Benoit was hauled out of the shaft, only to find himself a prisoner.

With his gang the outlaw was tied up in the stolen house, and the next day all hands, closely secured, were put on board the canoes, and taken down to Circle City under the escort of the Unknown and Company K, where after a fair trial they were judged guilty and run out of the country by the Northwest police.

Young Klondike, with Dick and Edith and enough men to help them out, packed up all the stolen goods on the raft including the portable house, and returned to their mine.

Here the house was put up and all made snug for the winter, after which our friends, leaving the mine in charge of Mat Morgan returned to Dawson City, which place they succeeded in reaching just before the river closed.

Grey Wolf was given clothes and blankets, and his gold changed into coin which made the old Indian rich beyond his wildest dreams.

Jack Adams, well rewarded by Ned, joined Company K, and was given a claim on the creek.

And these mines proving very rich, all the members of Company K are now in a fair way to wealth.

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